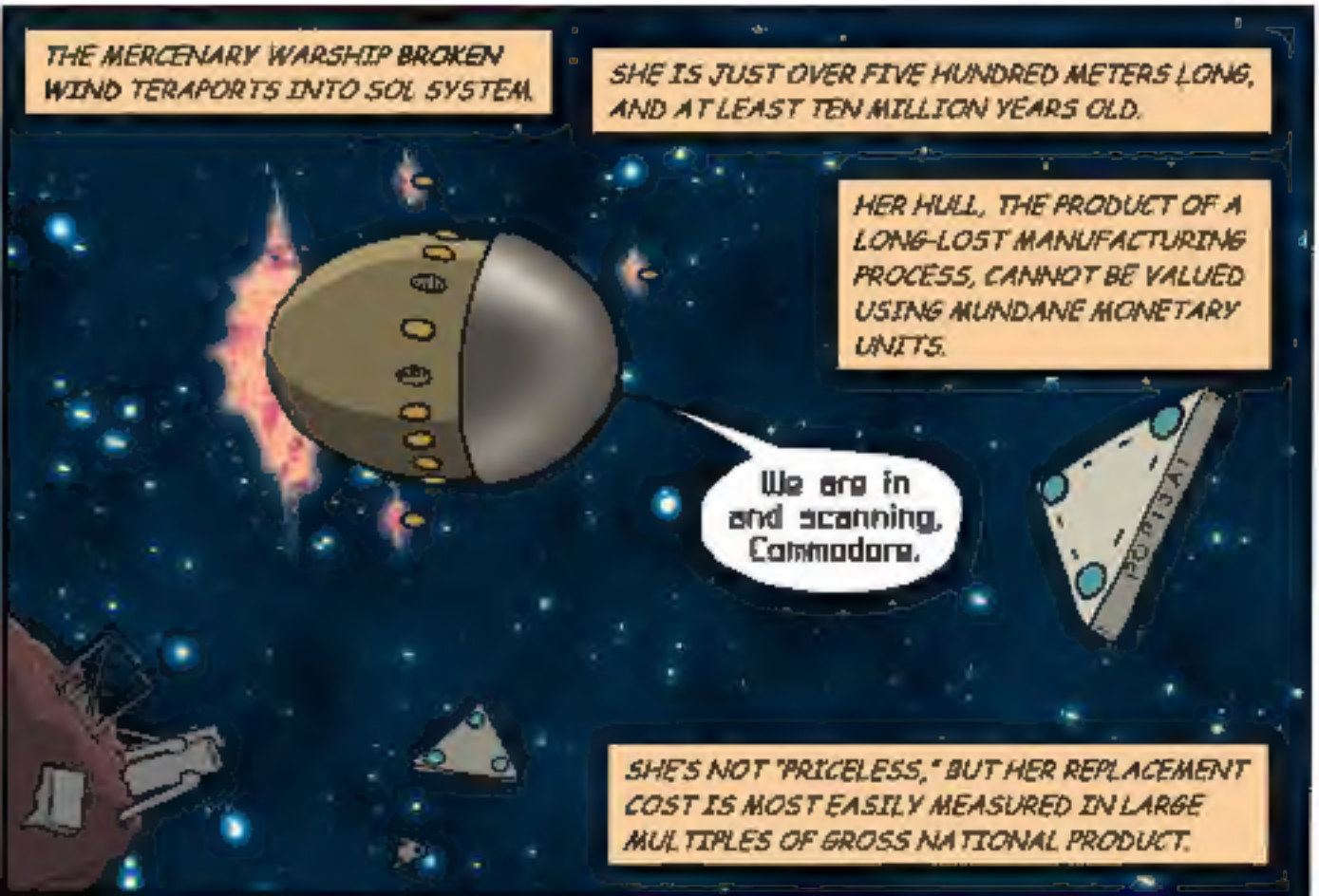
BOOK 16: BIG, DUMB OBJECTS

Maxim 24: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from a big gun.



THE MERCENARY MEGAFREIGHTER CINDERCONE TERAPORTS INTO SOL SYSTEM BEHIND THE WARSHIP BROKEN WIND.

WELCOME TO SOL SYSTEM, CINDY.

I've been here before, back when I still were that tiny gunship hull.

CINDERCONE IS BUILT OF THE SAME EXPENSIVE MATERIAL AS HER ESCORT, BUT AT EIGHT KILOMETERS IN DIAMETER SHE'S SIGNIFICANTLY LARGER...

IF BROKEN WIND'S VALUE IS BEST MEASURED IN MULTIPLES OF GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT, CINDERCONE'S PRICE TAG USES "KILO-GNP" TO SAVE TIME AND ZEROES.

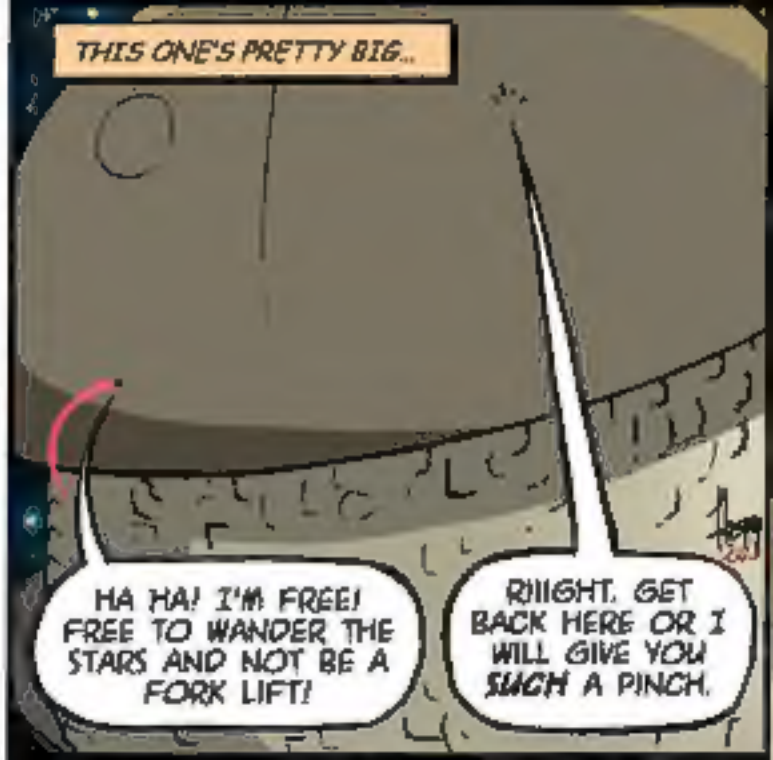
People are paying far more attention to me this time.

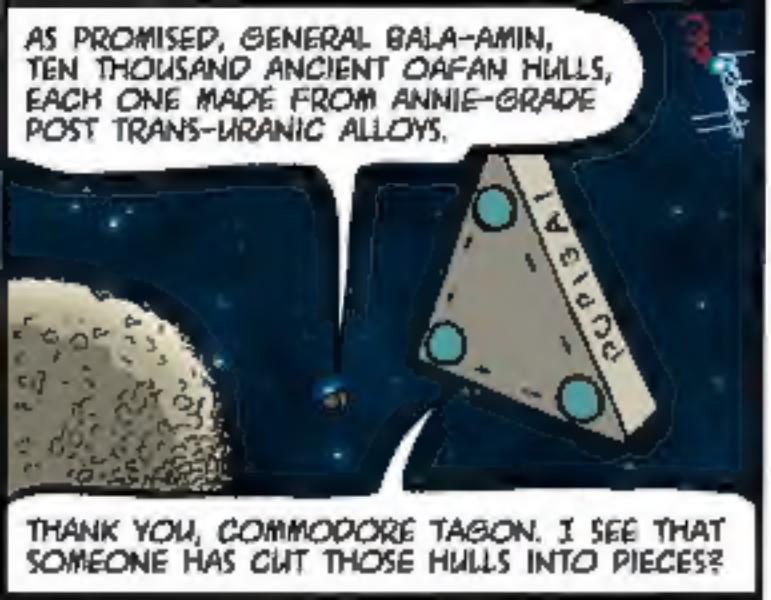
IT'S SO SHALLOW OF THEM TO WANT YOU FOR YOUR BODY.

IF YOU HAVE TO ASK HOW MANY ZEROES THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN, YOU DON'T HAVE ENOUGH ZEROES.

ABOARD THE DIVERGENT ELEVATOR, ONE OF CINDERCONE'S MANY BOATS...
OUR CARGO IS STRAPPED FOR THE DROP, CAPTAIN.
UNDERSTOOD. GOING HEMI IN TEN SECONDS.
SHE SPENDS HER TIME AND FUEL SHIFTING CARGO AND REPOSITIONING INTERIOR BAFFLES.

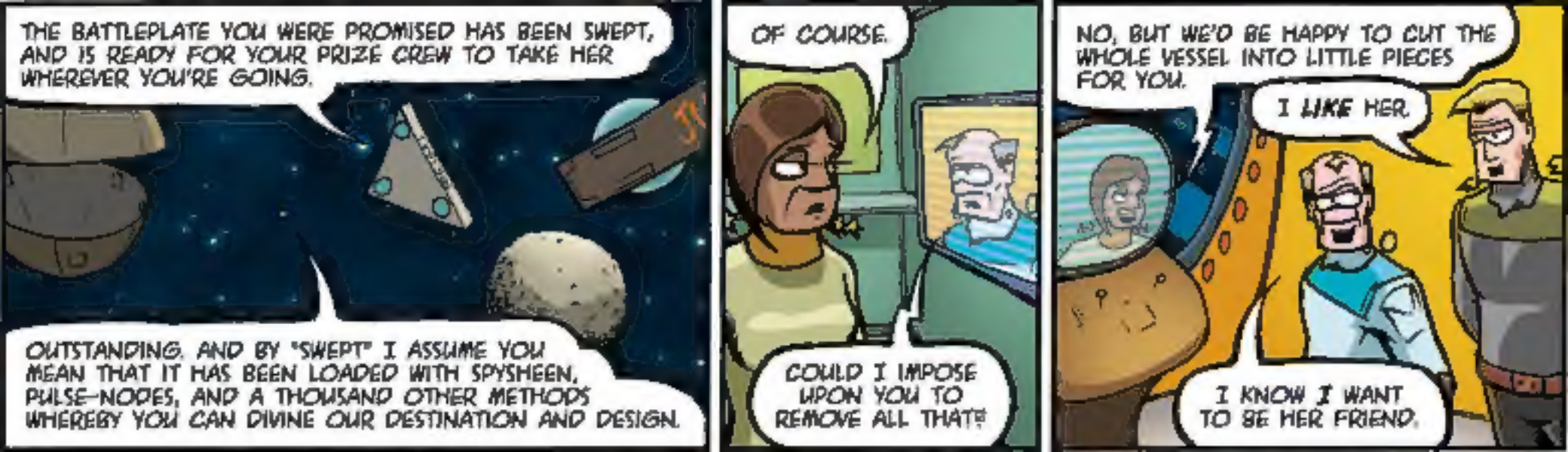
SHE ONLY GETS OUTSIDE DURING BIG DELIVERIES.


THIS ONE'S PRETTY BIG...
HA HA! I'M FREE! FREE TO WANDER THE STARS AND NOT BE A FORK LIFT!
RIIIGHT. GET BACK HERE OR I WILL GIVE YOU SUCH A PINCH.


AS PROMISED, GENERAL BALA-AMIN, TEN THOUSAND ANCIENT OAFAN HULLS, EACH ONE MADE FROM ANNIE-GRADE POST TRANS-URANIC ALLOYS.
THANK YOU, COMMODORE TAGON. I SEE THAT SOMEONE HAS CUT THOSE HULLS INTO PIECES?

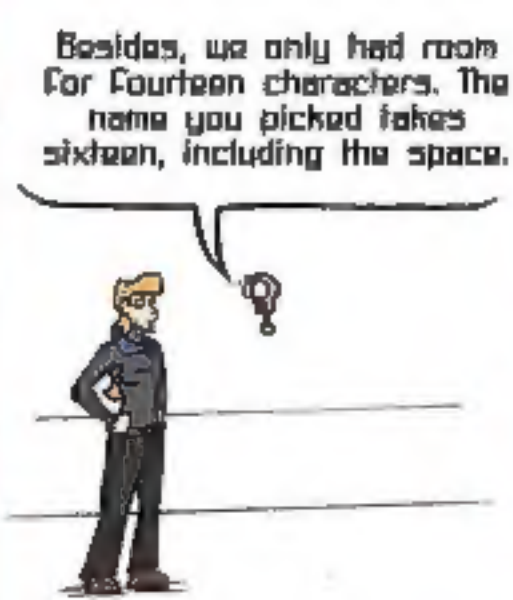
I WAS TOLD THE U.N.S. PLANNED TO REFORGE THEM AS ANNIE-PLANTS.
WE SAVED YOU SOME TIME.
YES, BUT WE COULD HAVE LEARNED A LOT FROM THE EXAMINATION OF INTACT SHIPS.

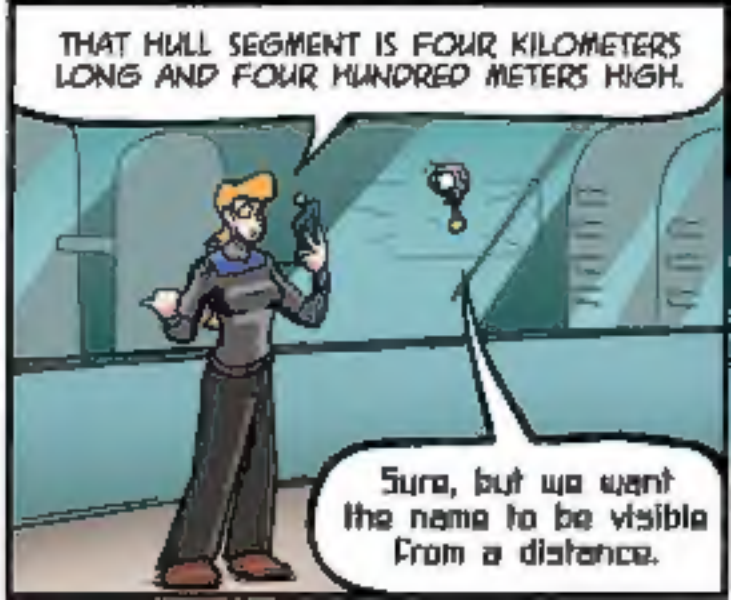
AND INSTEAD YOU LEARNED THAT WE POSSESS FIREPOWER SUFFICIENT TO IDLY CHOP TEN THOUSAND WARSHIPS INTO DIGESTIBLE CHUNKS.
WE ALSO LEARNED THAT OUR CONTRACTS WITH YOU NEED TO BE MORE EXPLICIT.

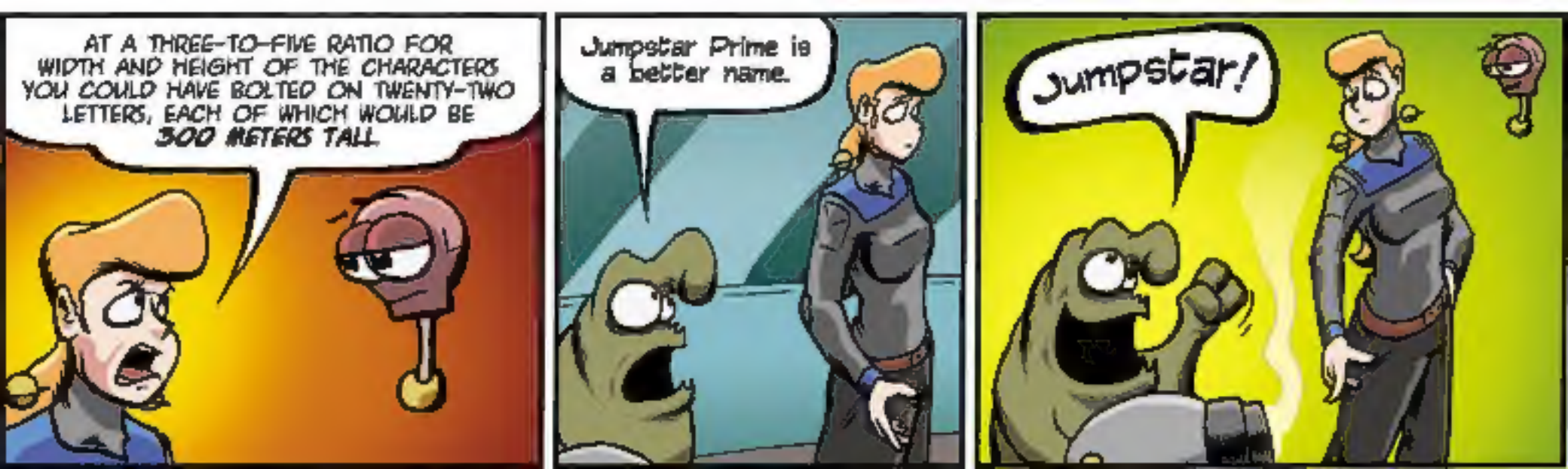

THE BATTLEPLATE YOU WERE PROMISED HAS BEEN SWEPT, AND IS READY FOR YOUR PRIZE CREW TO TAKE HER WHEREVER YOU'RE GOING.
OUTSTANDING. AND BY "SWEPT" I ASSUME YOU MEAN THAT IT HAS BEEN LOADED WITH SPYSHEEN, PULSE-NODES, AND A THOUSAND OTHER METHODS WHEREBY YOU CAN DIVINE OUR DESTINATION AND DESIGN.
OF COURSE.
COULD I IMPOSE UPON YOU TO REMOVE ALL THAT?
NO, BUT WE'D BE HAPPY TO CUT THE WHOLE VESSEL INTO LITTLE PIECES FOR YOU.
I LIKE HER.
I KNOW I WANT TO BE HER FRIEND.

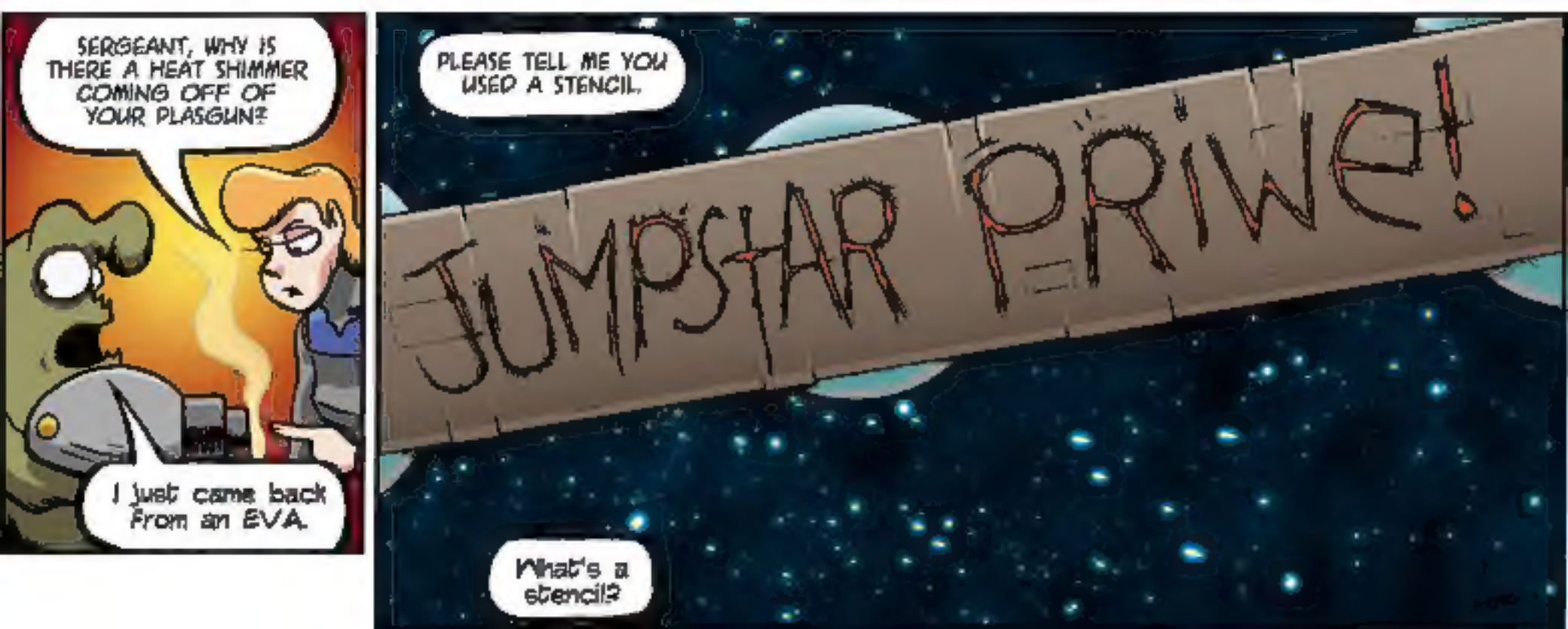
GENERAL, IN THE INTEREST OF FURTHERING HEALTHY DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE NEOAFAN FREEHOLD AND THE U.N.S., WOULD YOU JOIN US FOR DINNER?
YES, BUT BE WARNED: I'M A STRICT BACTOTARIAN WHO LIKES TO ASK POINTED QUESTIONS.
OUTSTANDING. WE HAVE A COLLECTION OF THREE-STAR VAT CULTURES, OUR CHEF LOVES TO IMPRESS GUESTS, AND I LEAK LIKE DOM ATLANTIS ONCE I HAVE A COUPLE OF DRINKS IN ME.
DINNER IT IS, THEN. I LOOK FORWARD TO IT.
DAD, ARE YOU FLIRTING WITH GENERAL BALA-AMIN?
WHILE REMINDING HER WHOSE GUNS DRILLED THAT HOLE UNDER DOM ATLANTIS? YES.

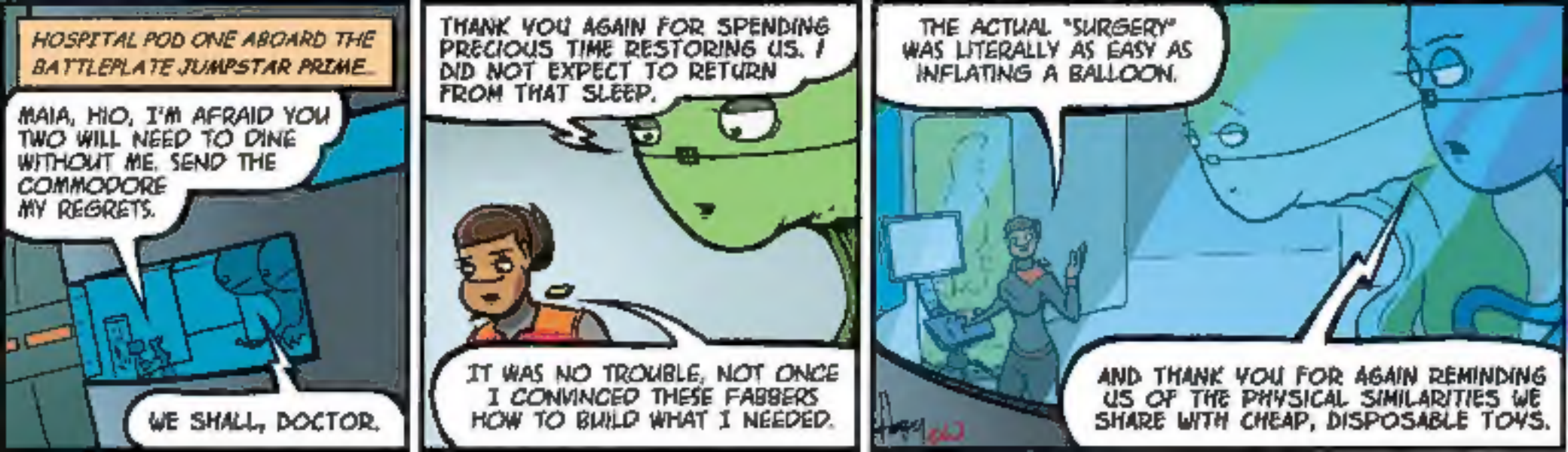
ABOARD A DECOMMISSIONED U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE, NEWLY RECHRISTENED JUMPSTAR PRIME...
ENNESBY! THAT IS NOT THE NAME WE PICKED!
"Jumpstart Primer" seemed a little too on-the-nose.

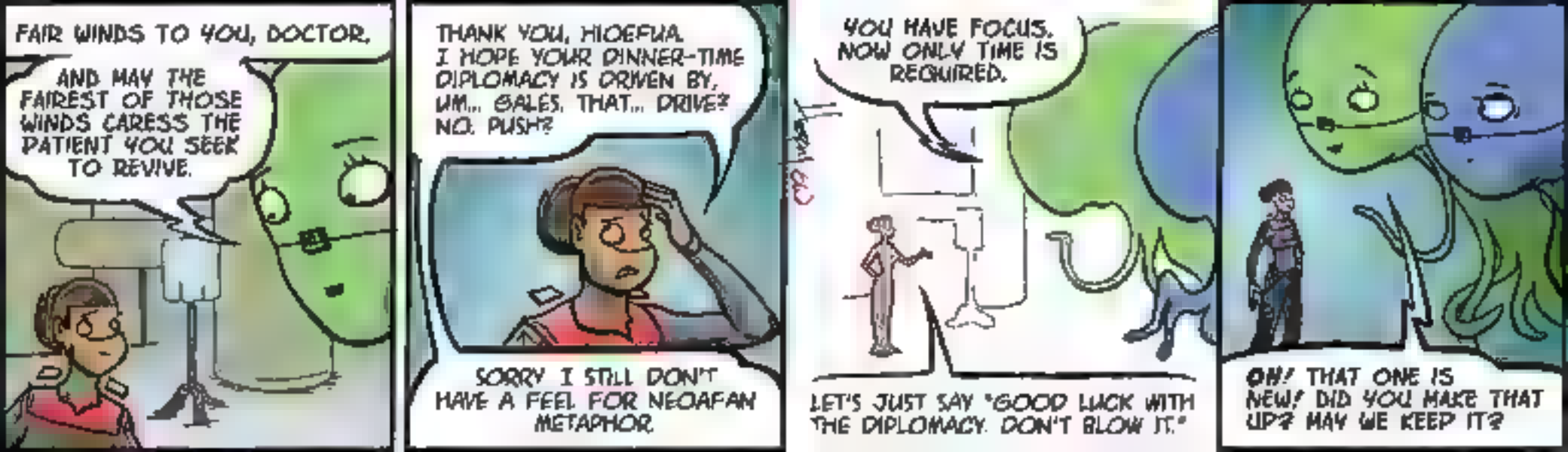

Besides, we only had room for fourteen characters. The name you picked takes sixteen, including the space.


THAT HULL SEGMENT IS FOUR KILOMETERS LONG AND FOUR HUNDRED METERS HIGH.
Sure, but we want the name to be visible from a distance.

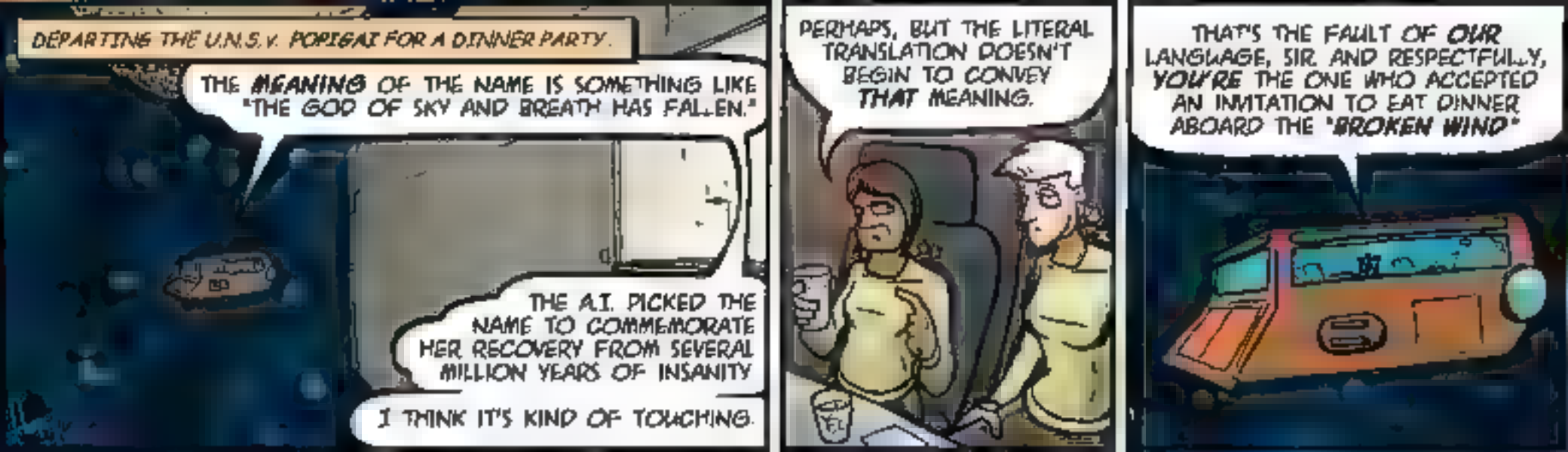

AT A THREE-TO-FIVE RATIO FOR WIDTH AND HEIGHT OF THE CHARACTERS YOU COULD HAVE BOLTED ON TWENTY-TWO LETTERS, EACH OF WHICH WOULD BE 300 METERS TALL.
Jumpstar Prime is a better name.
Jumpstar!


SERGEANT, WHY IS THERE A HEAT SHIMMER COMING OFF OF YOUR PLASGUN?
I just came back from an EVA.
PLEASE TELL ME YOU USED A STENCIL.
JUMPSTAR PRIME!
What's a stencil?

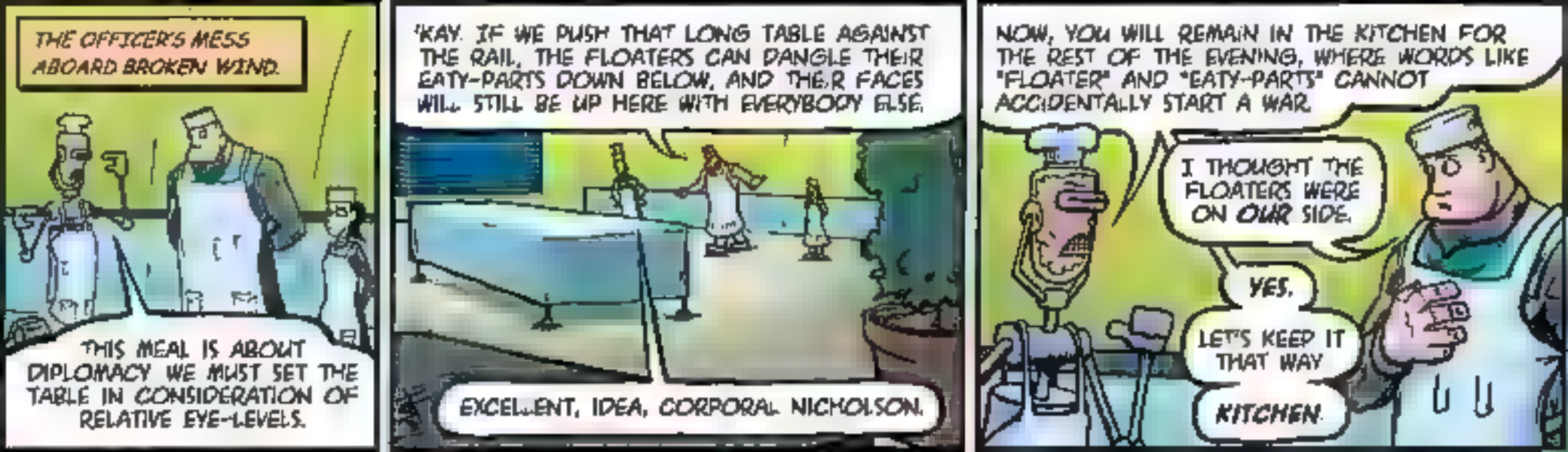

HOSPITAL POD ONE ABOARD THE BATTLEPLATE JUMPSTAR PRIME.
MAIA, HIO, I'M AFRAID YOU TWO WILL NEED TO DINE WITHOUT ME. SEND THE COMMODORE MY REGRETS.
WE SHALL, DOCTOR.
THANK YOU AGAIN FOR SPENDING PRECIOUS TIME RESTORING US. I DID NOT EXPECT TO RETURN FROM THAT SLEEP.
IT WAS NO TROUBLE, NOT ONCE I CONVINCED THESE FABBERS HOW TO BUILD WHAT I NEEDED.
THE ACTUAL "SURGERY" WAS LITERALLY AS EASY AS INFLATING A BALLOON.
AND THANK YOU FOR AGAIN REMINDING US OF THE PHYSICAL SIMILARITIES WE SHARE WITH CHEAP, DISPOSABLE TOYS.


FAIR WINDS TO YOU, DOCTOR.
AND MAY THE FAIREST OF THOSE WINDS CARESS THE PATIENT YOU SEEK TO REVIVE.
THANK YOU, HIOEFUA. I HOPE YOUR DINNER-TIME DIPLOMACY IS DRIVEN BY, UM... GALES. THAT... DRIVE? NO. PUSH?
SORRY I STILL DON'T HAVE A FEEL FOR NEOAFAN METAPHOR.
YOU HAVE FOCUS. NOW ONLY TIME IS REQUIRED.
LET'S JUST SAY "GOOD LUCK WITH THE DIPLOMACY. DON'T BLOW IT."
OH! THAT ONE IS NEW! DID YOU MAKE THAT UP? MAY WE KEEP IT?

THE COMMAND POD.
CHELLE, I'M GOING TO THE FLAGSHIP FOR A DIPLOMATIC THINGY
YOU HAVE COMMAND OF THE... THE...
UGH.
I CAN'T EVEN SAY THE NAME.
Jumpstar Prime!
DO NOT LET THE SERGEANT BURN ANY MORE GRAFFITI ON OUR HULL.


DEPARTING THE U.N.S.V. POPIGAI FOR A DINNER PARTY.
THE MEANING OF THE NAME IS SOMETHING LIKE "THE GOD OF SKY AND BREATH HAS FALLEN."
THE A.I. PICKED THE NAME TO COMMEMORATE HER RECOVERY FROM SEVERAL MILLION YEARS OF INSANITY
I THINK IT'S KIND OF TOUCHING.
PERHAPS, BUT THE LITERAL TRANSLATION DOESN'T BEGIN TO CONVEY THAT MEANING.
THAT'S THE FAULT OF OUR LANGUAGE, SIR. AND RESPECTFULLY, YOU'RE THE ONE WHO ACCEPTED AN INVITATION TO EAT DINNER ABOARD THE "BROKEN WIND"

CINDERCONE COMMAND DECK NORTH HEMI
THE SHIP IS YOURS, THURL. I'M OFF TO A DINNER PARTY
RECONFIGURE THE BAFFLES AND BULKHEADS TO CRADLE OUR NEXT LOAD.
SHALL I CLOSE HER BACK UP?
HMMM... NO.
TAKE THE SOUTH HEMI AROUND AND GIVE POPIGAI A GOOD LOOK AT HER INSIDE.
"GET IN MY BELLY" ISN'T A VERY SUBTLE MESSAGE, CAPTAIN.
I WAS SAYING "NOTHING UP MY SLEEVE" BUT I LIKE YOUR VERSION, TOO.

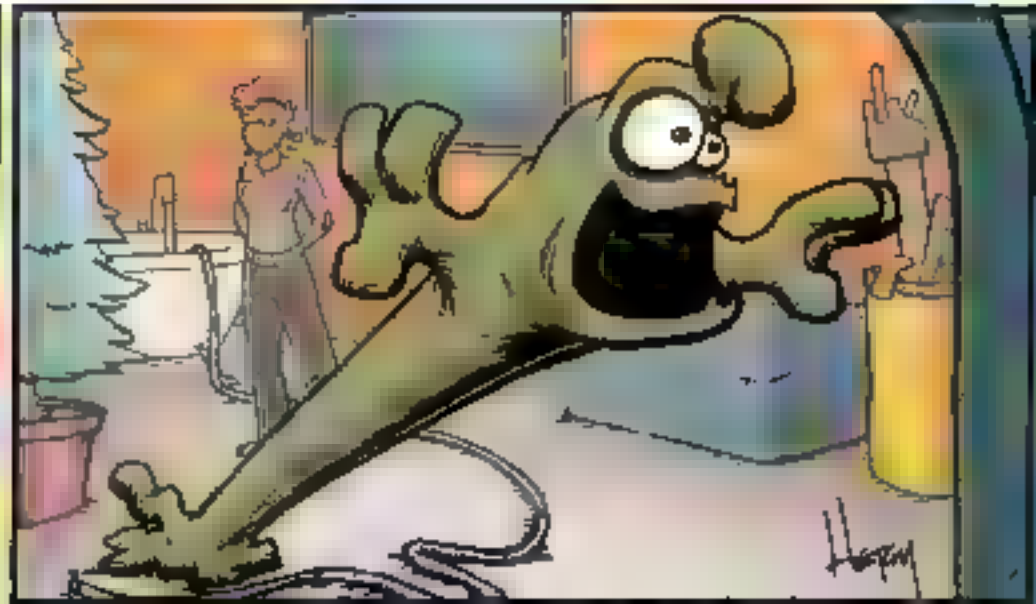

THE OFFICER'S MESS ABOARD BROKEN WIND.
THIS MEAL IS ABOUT DIPLOMACY. WE MUST SET THE TABLE IN CONSIDERATION OF RELATIVE EYE-LEVELS.
'KAY. IF WE PUSH THAT LONG TABLE AGAINST THE RAIL, THE FLOATERS CAN DANGLE THEIR EATY-PARTS DOWN BELOW, AND THEIR FACES WILL STILL BE UP HERE WITH EVERYBODY ELSE.
EXCELLENT, IDEA, CORPORAL NICHOLSON.
NOW, YOU WILL REMAIN IN THE KITCHEN FOR THE REST OF THE EVENING, WHERE WORDS LIKE "FLOATER" AND "EATY-PARTS" CANNOT ACCIDENTALLY START A WAR.
I THOUGHT THE FLOATERS WERE ON OUR SIDE.
YES.
LET'S KEEP IT THAT WAY
KITCHEN.

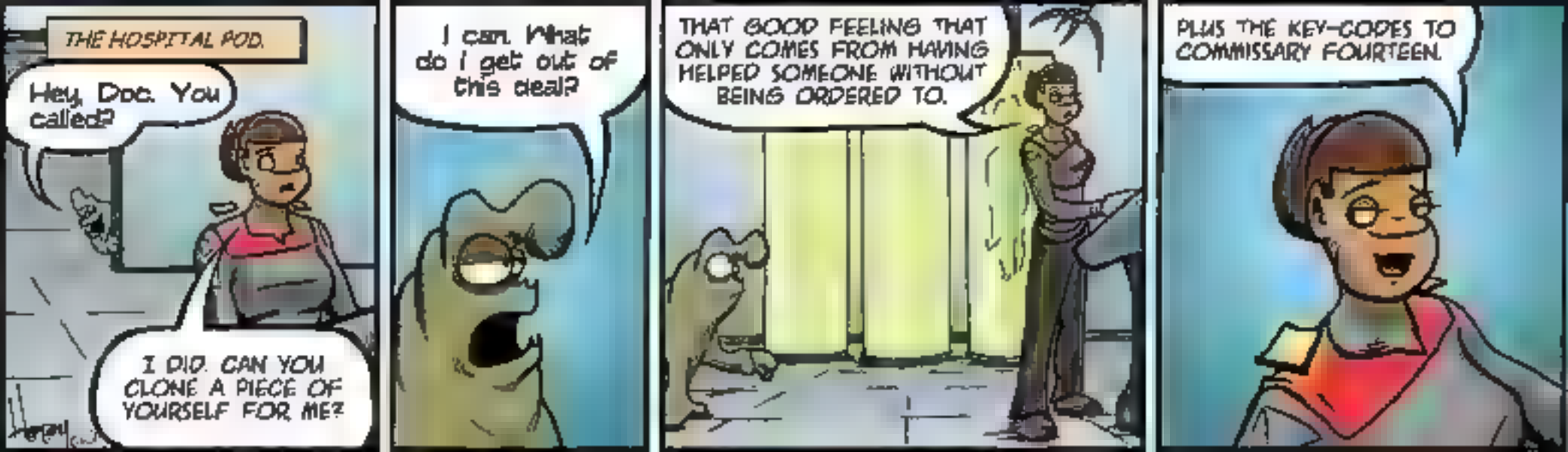
THE PRIZE CREW'S "RUMPUS POD" ABOARD JUMPSTAR PRIME
SERGEANT SCHLOCK, THE DOCTOR NEEDS YOUR HELP WITH SOMETHING IN THE HOSPITAL POD.
Right. I'm on my...
wait.

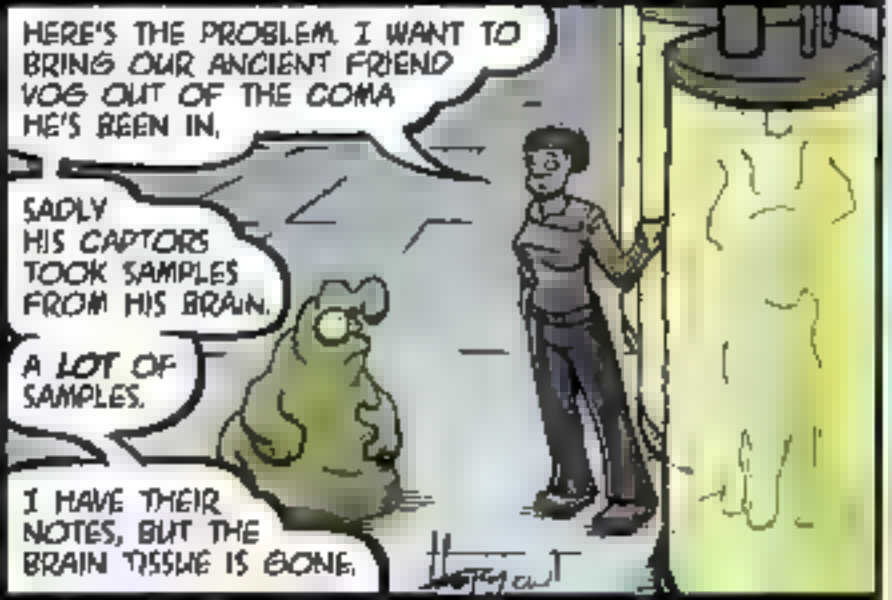
If there's hospital-type work to be done, she'd call for somebody besides me.
If she wants to tell me a thing, or have me tell her a thing, I don't need to be there in person.
If there's another leftover hazard to clean up, she'd be calling for more than just me.
You know what that means?
NO, BECAUSE SHE DIDN'T TELL ME WHAT SHE WANTS.

She wants to give me a serious poke with something too big to haul with her, and too ouchy to warn me about.

OR MAYBE SHE WANTS TO GIVE YOU A TREAT WITHOUT ALERTING ANYBODY ELSE TO THE FACT THAT SHE ONLY HAS THE ONE SHE GOT ESPECIALLY FOR YOU.

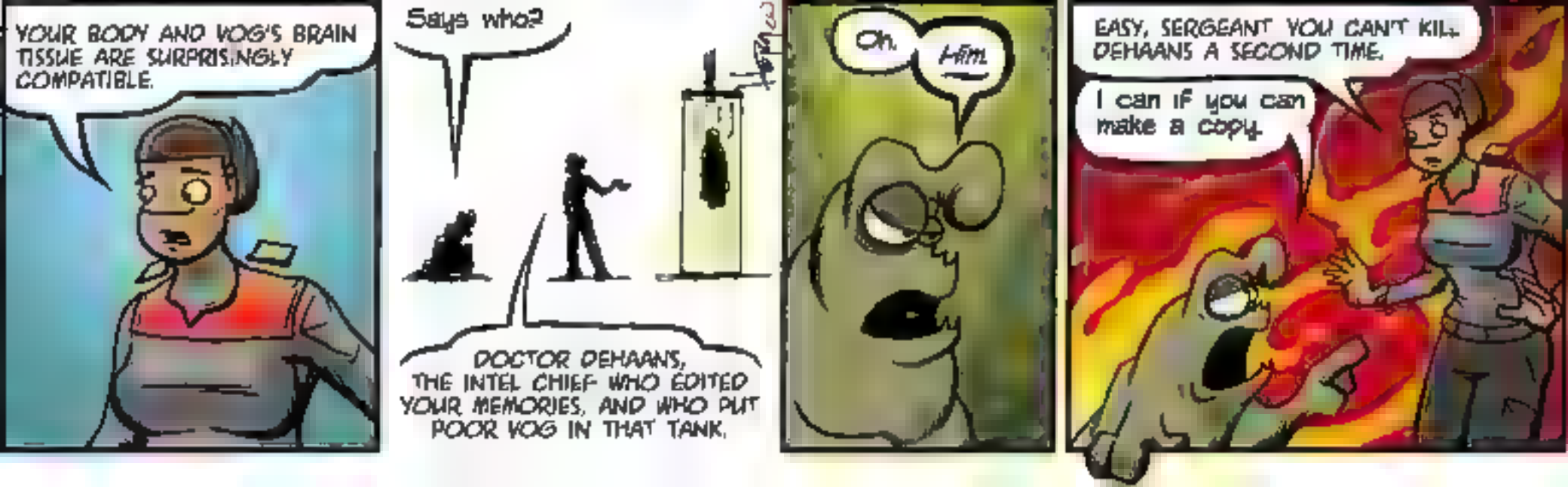



THE HOSPITAL POD.
Hey, Doc. You called?
I DID. CAN YOU CLONE A PIECE OF YOURSELF FOR ME?
I can. What do I get out of this deal?
THAT GOOD FEELING THAT ONLY COMES FROM HAVING HELPED SOMEONE WITHOUT BEING ORDERED TO.
PLUS THE KEY-CODES TO COMMISSARY FOURTEEN.

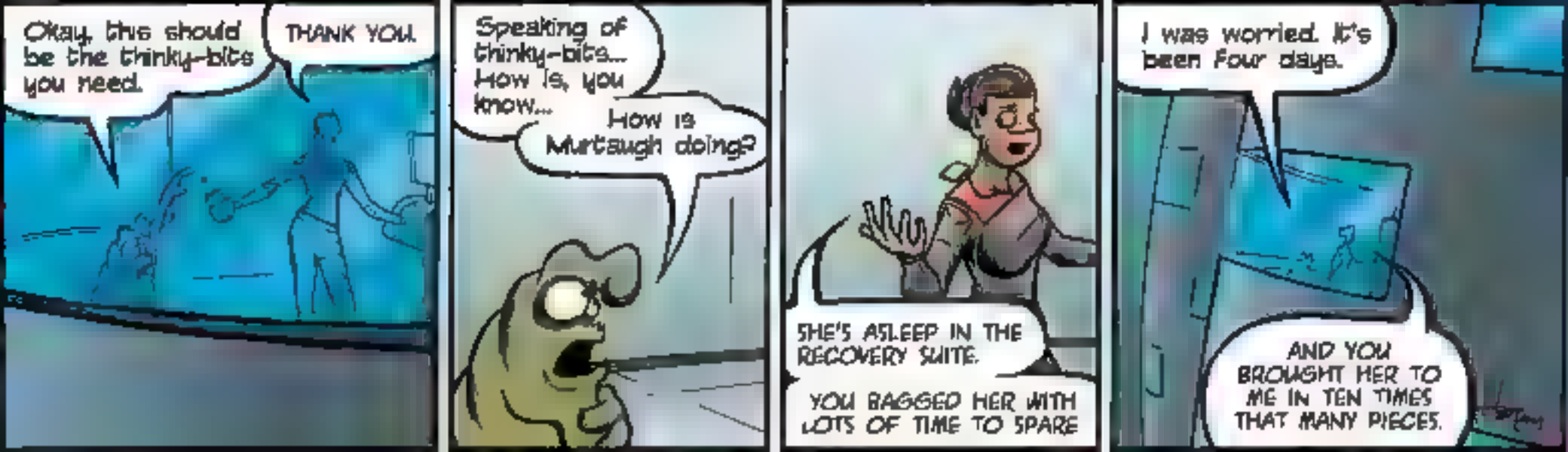

HERE'S THE PROBLEM. I WANT TO BRING OUR ANCIENT FRIEND VOG OUT OF THE COMA HE'S BEEN IN.
SADLY HIS CAPTORS TOOK SAMPLES FROM HIS BRAIN.
A LOT OF SAMPLES.
I HAVE THEIR NOTES, BUT THE BRAIN TISSUE IS GONE.

Which bits are missing?
THE ABILITY TO SPEAK OUR LANGUAGE, FOR STARTERS.

Why would they take that?
I'M GOING TO GUESS THAT IT FELL OUT WHILE THEY WERE STEALING TEN MILLION YEARS OF HIS MEMORIES.


YOUR BODY AND VOG'S BRAIN TISSUE ARE SURPRISINGLY COMPATIBLE.
Says who?
DOCTOR DEHAANS, THE INTEL CHIEF WHO EDITED YOUR MEMORIES, AND WHO PUT POOR VOG IN THAT TANK.
Oh.
Hm.
EASY, SERGEANT YOU CAN'T KILL DEHAANS A SECOND TIME.
I can if you can make a copy.

I NEED YOU TO CLONE OFF A PIECE OF YOURSELF THAT CONTAINS THE KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LANGUAGE.
So you can stick it into Vog's head?
THE GRAFT IS MORE COMPLEX THAN THAT, BUT YES, BASICALLY
So Vog will wake up craving Ovalkwik, and kreely, and puppies, and churros...
I'M NOT ASKING FOR YOUR FAVORITE FOODS. I'M ASKING FOR WORDS.
They all use the same hole.
WELL... FIND A WAY TO SEPARATE THEM, OR LEARN HOW TO SHARE MEALS.


Okay, this should be the thinky-bits you need.
THANK YOU.
Speaking of thinky-bits... How is, you know...
How is Murtaugh doing?
SHE'S ASLEEP IN THE RECOVERY SUITE.
YOU BAGGED HER WITH LOTS OF TIME TO SPARE
I was worried. It's been four days.
AND YOU BROUGHT HER TO ME IN TEN TIMES THAT MANY PIECES.

RECOVERY ROOM, HOSPITAL POD
Captain, are you awake yet?
BARELY. IS THIS THE HOSPITAL POD?
Yeah. There was a bomb. You were dead.
MY FACE FEELS DIFFERENT
That was one of the pieces I couldn't find.

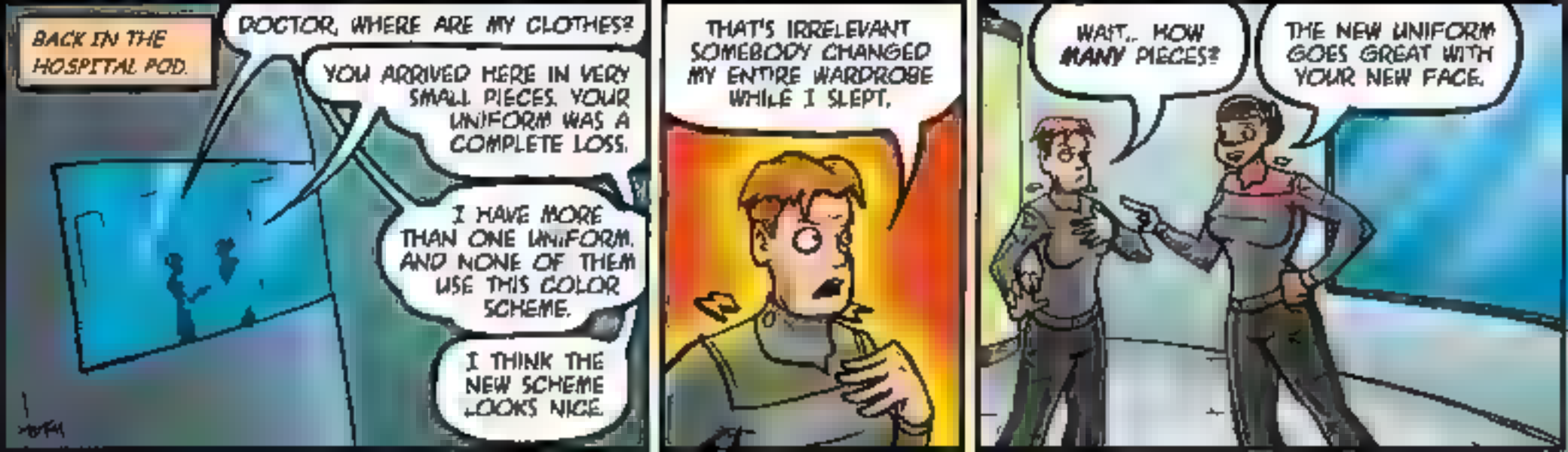
ABOARD THE MERCENARY BATTLESHIP BROKEN WIND
CAPTAIN ON DECK!
MARK MARK MARK
CAPTAIN ON DECK!
AUUNNGH..
MARKED

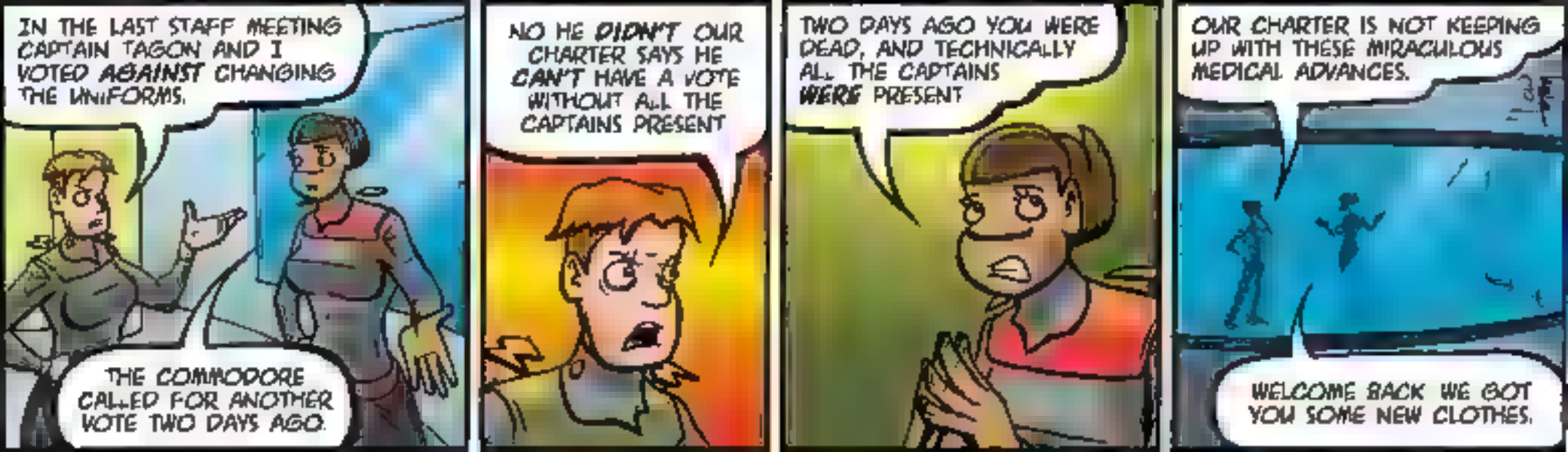
RED TEAM! BLUE TEAM! WE HAVE NEW PLAYERS! SCENARIO CHANGE!
SLOPPY TAKE-DOWN, SON. NOW THEY KNOW WE'RE HERE.
IT'S MORE SPORTING THIS WAY.
RED TEAM IS JOINING BLUE. THE CAPTAIN AND THE COMMODORE ARE THE NEW RED TEAM. I AM UPDATING EVERYONE'S I.F.F. ACCORDINGLY
THOSE ARE MY KIND OF ODDS. READY, DAD?
ALSO, DO NOT TRUST YOUR I.F.F.! I CANNOT REVOKE CAPTAIN TAGON'S AUTHORITY TO ALTER IT, AND AS YOU ALL KNOW, OUR CAPTAIN IS A DEVIOUS, RUTHLESS CHEATER.
THESE ARE NO LONGER MY KIND OF ODDS.
IT'S MORE SPORTING THIS WAY

WE CAN'T FOOL THEM WITH AN I.F.F. HACK. WHAT'S PLAN B?
YOU DIDN'T THINK THIS THROUGH VERY WELL.
I FAILED TO ACCOUNT FOR ENFORCED SPORTSMANSHIP.

IF WE DON'T FINISH THIS WAR GAME IN THE NEXT TEN MINUTES, WE'RE GOING TO BE LATE FOR DINNER.
WE COULD FORFEIT, AND WALK OUT, BUT THAT WOULD BE VERY BAD FOR MORALE.
I'M NOT AN IDIOT, DAD.
WE COULD RUSH THEM, AND LOSE GLORIOUSLY
I THOUGHT OF THAT ALREADY.
"HOW MANY OF THEM CAN I TAKE WITH ME" IS A PRETTY GOOD GAME.
I LIKE THE "I WIN THE GAME" GAME A LOT BETTER.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
PARLEY!
YES SIR, COMMODORE. HOLDING OUR FIRE.
I HAVE TO GO GREET OUR GUESTS, AND THE CAPTAIN LIKES PLAYING REALLY LONG ODDS. I'M OUT. GOOD GAME.
TREACHERY!
CHECK YOUR MESSAGES BOY. I'M SENDING YOU SOME PICTURES ON MY WAY OUT.


BACK IN THE HOSPITAL POD.
DOCTOR, WHERE ARE MY CLOTHES?
YOU ARRIVED HERE IN VERY SMALL PIECES. YOUR UNIFORM WAS A COMPLETE LOSS.
I HAVE MORE THAN ONE UNIFORM. AND NONE OF THEM USE THIS COLOR SCHEME.
I THINK THE NEW SCHEME LOOKS NICE.
THAT'S IRRELEVANT SOMEBODY CHANGED MY ENTIRE WARDROBE WHILE I SLEPT.
WAIT... HOW MANY PIECES?
THE NEW UNIFORM GOES GREAT WITH YOUR NEW FACE.


IN THE LAST STAFF MEETING CAPTAIN TAGON AND I VOTED AGAINST CHANGING THE UNIFORMS.
THE COMMODORE CALLED FOR ANOTHER VOTE TWO DAYS AGO.
NO HE DIDN'T OUR CHARTER SAYS HE CAN'T HAVE A VOTE WITHOUT ALL THE CAPTAINS PRESENT
TWO DAYS AGO YOU WERE DEAD, AND TECHNICALLY ALL THE CAPTAINS WERE PRESENT
OUR CHARTER IS NOT KEEPING UP WITH THESE MIRACULOUS MEDICAL ADVANCES.
WELCOME BACK WE GOT YOU SOME NEW CLOTHES.

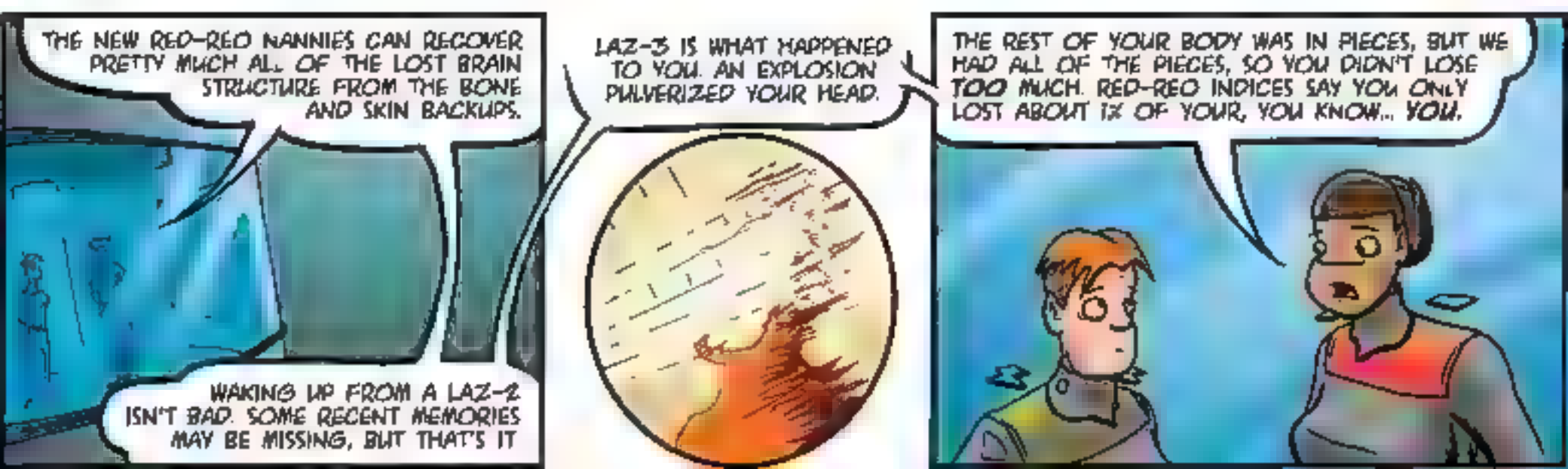
YOU KEEP SAYING I WAS DEAD. EXACTLY HOW DEAD WAS I?
ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE LAZ SCALE?

ALL I KNOW IS THAT IT'S ONE THROUGH FIVE.
GOOD ENOUGH. ON A SCALE OF ONE-DEAD TO FIVE-DEAD, YOU WERE THREE-DEAD.

I GUESS I SHOULD BE GLAD I WASN'T ALL THE WAY DEAD.

DO YOU WANT A FULL EXPLANATION OF THE NUMBERS, OR DO YOU WANT TO KEEP THAT GLAD FEELING?

HOSPITAL POD ONE
JUMPSTAR PRIME
IF YOU GET SHOT IN THE CHEST, AND YOUR HEART AND BRAIN BOTH STOP, THAT'S LAZ-1.
NANNY-BAGS, CRYOKITS, AND REPLACEMENT ORGANS HAVE BEEN LETTING US BRING PEOPLE BACK FROM LAZ-1 DEATH FOR A LONG TIME NOW.
IT'S ALMOST EXACTLY LIKE WAKING UP FROM A COMA. SOMETIMES IT'S LIKE WAKING UP FROM A REALLY GOOD NAP.
NOW... IF YOU GET SHOT IN THE HEAD, DESTROYING SOME BRAIN TISSUE, THAT'S LAZ-2.
OW.
VERY BRIEFLY, YES.

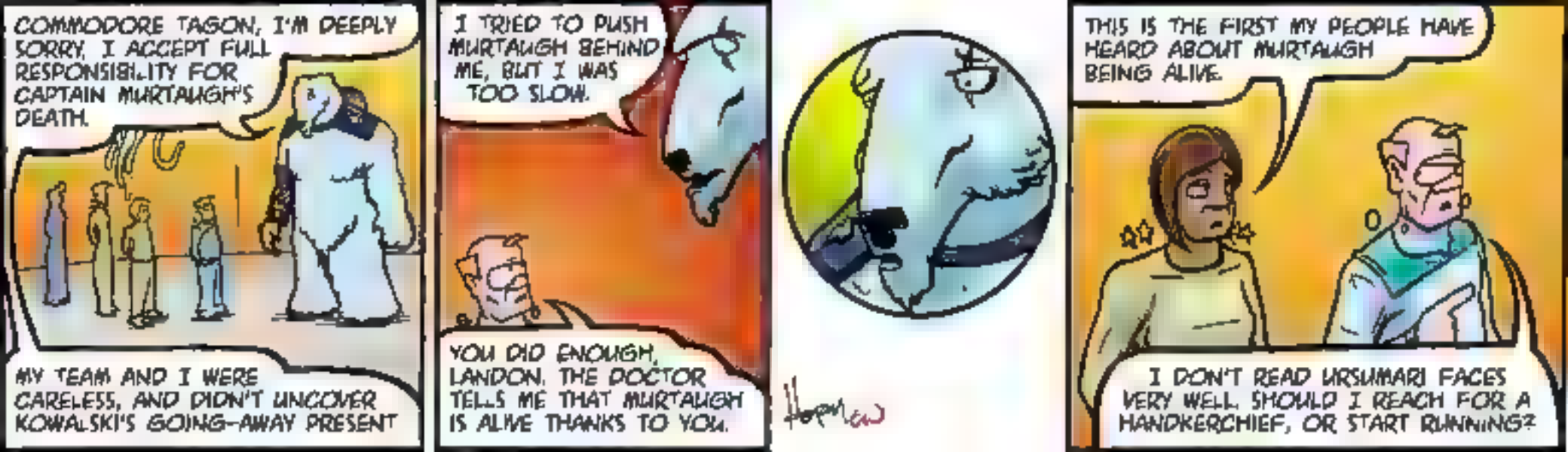

THE NEW RED-REO NANNIES CAN RECOVER PRETTY MUCH ALL OF THE LOST BRAIN STRUCTURE FROM THE BONE AND SKIN BACKUPS.
WAKING UP FROM A LAZ-2 ISN'T BAD. SOME RECENT MEMORIES MAY BE MISSING, BUT THAT'S IT
LAZ-3 IS WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU. AN EXPLOSION PULVERIZED YOUR HEAD.
THE REST OF YOUR BODY WAS IN PIECES, BUT WE HAD ALL OF THE PIECES, SO YOU DIDN'T LOSE TOO MUCH. RED-REO INDICES SAY YOU ONLY LOST ABOUT 1% OF YOUR, YOU KNOW... YOU.

LAZ-Y IS WHEN THE BRAIN IS GONE AND THE RED-REO HAS BEEN COMPROMISED
IT'S WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE HAD IF OUR MASSIVE URSUMARI FRIEND HADN'T REACHED IN FRONT OF YOU.

SANCTUM MAIORI...
HOW'S HE DOING?

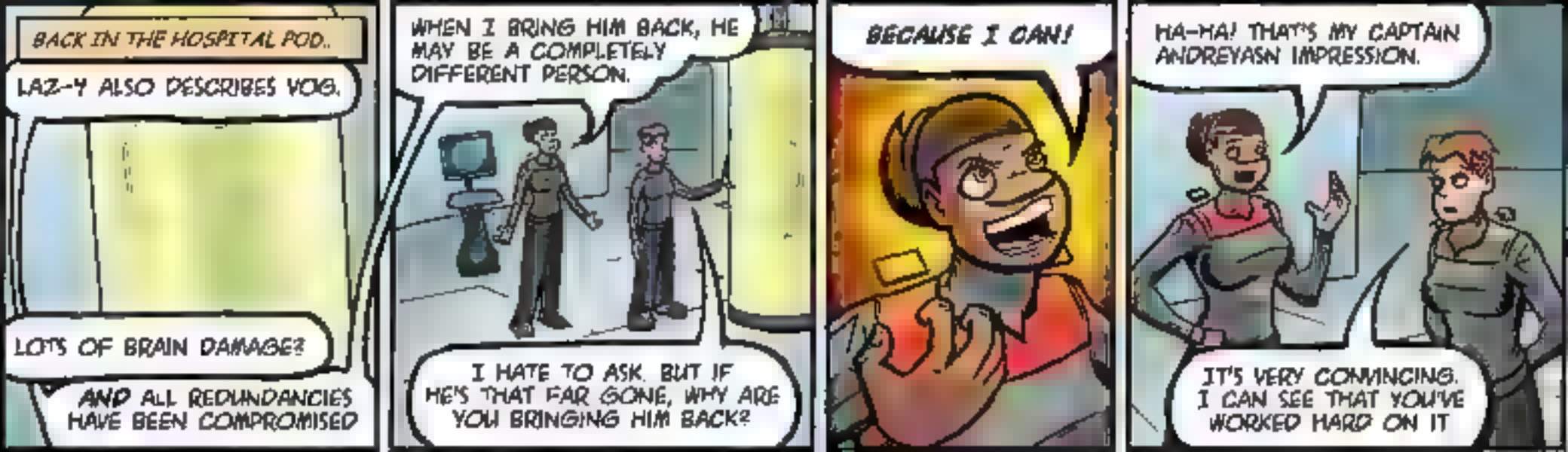
MEANWHILE
CAPTAIN LANDON! I HAVE HEARD A LOT ABOUT YOU. I WANNA SHAKE YOUR...

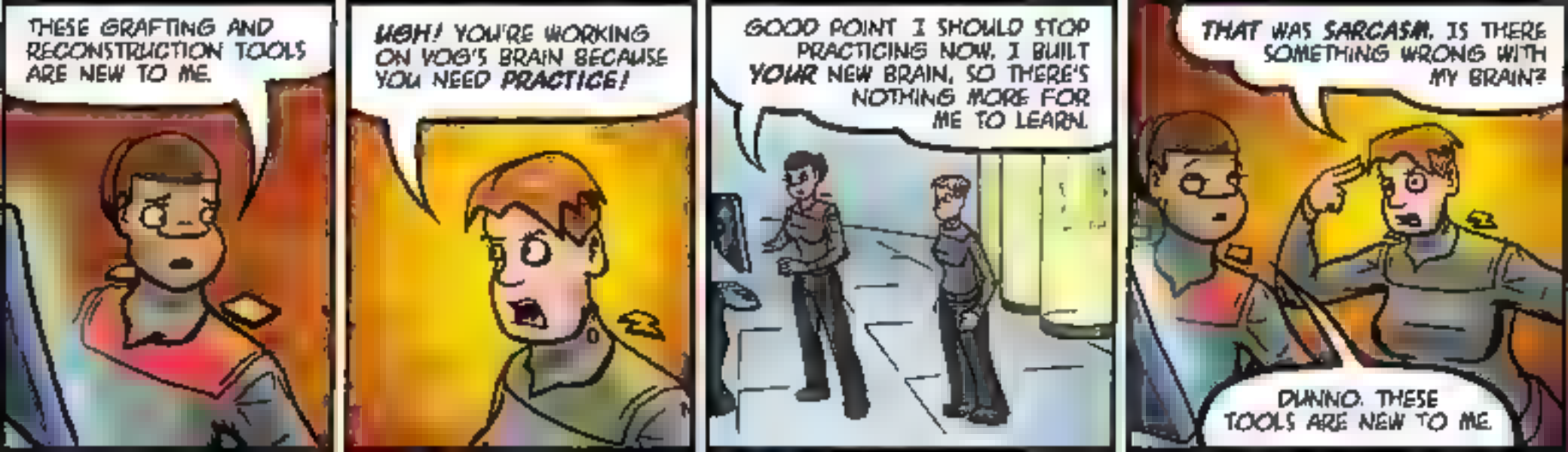
IS IT SAFE TO TOUCH THAT?
I DON'T KNOW. TENZY BUILT IT, AND SHE'S ALL ABOUT BEING A WEAPON.


COMMODORE TAGON, I'M DEEPLY SORRY. I ACCEPT FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR CAPTAIN MURTAUGH'S DEATH.
MY TEAM AND I WERE CARELESS, AND DIDN'T UNCOVER KOWALSKI'S GOING-AWAY PRESENT
I TRIED TO PUSH MURTAUGH BEHIND ME, BUT I WAS TOO SLOW.
YOU DID ENOUGH, LANDON. THE DOCTOR TELLS ME THAT MURTAUGH IS ALIVE THANKS TO YOU.
THIS IS THE FIRST MY PEOPLE HAVE HEARD ABOUT MURTAUGH BEING ALIVE.
I DON'T READ URSUMARI FACES VERY WELL. SHOULD I REACH FOR A HANDKERCHIEF, OR START RUNNING?

COMMANDER FOXWORTHY! WHEN WERE YOU GOING TO TELL OUR HEROIC, HUMONGOUS FRIEND THAT MURTAUGH IS ALIVE?
I WAS GOING TO WAIT UNTIL THE DOCTOR REVIVED HER.
WHAT WAS YOUR PLAN, COMMANDER? WERE YOU GOING TO HAVE HER JUMP IN AND SURPRISE A THOUSAND KILOS OF GRIEVING CARNIVORE?
HEY, NOW. SEVEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY
I ROUNDED UP FOR DRAMATIC EFFECT

FRIENDS, THIS IS EXACTLY THE SORT OF THING HOLDING US BACK. WHY ARE WE STILL KEEPING SECRETS?
WE ARE NOT ENEMIES, AND WE HAVE COMMON INTERESTS. LET'S TALK.
I AGREE, COMMODORE.
I AM A BIT CURIOUS, THOUGH. YOUR LITTLE COMPANY HAS STRUCK IT RICH. WHY HAVEN'T ALL OF YOU RETIRED?
I'M SORRY. WHEN I SAID "LET'S TALK" WHAT I MEANT WAS "DRINKS ARE THIS WAY."


BACK IN THE HOSPITAL POD..
LAZ-Y ALSO DESCRIBES VOIG.
LOTS OF BRAIN DAMAGE?
AND ALL REDUNDANCIES HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED
WHEN I BRING HIM BACK, HE MAY BE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSON.
I HATE TO ASK. BUT IF HE'S THAT FAR GONE, WHY ARE YOU BRINGING HIM BACK?
BECAUSE I CAN!
HA-HA! THAT'S MY CAPTAIN ANDREYASN IMPRESSION.
IT'S VERY CONVINCING. I CAN SEE THAT YOU'VE WORKED HARD ON IT


THESE GRAFTING AND RECONSTRUCTION TOOLS ARE NEW TO ME.
UGH! YOU'RE WORKING ON VOG'S BRAIN BECAUSE YOU NEED *PRACTICE!*
GOOD POINT. I SHOULD STOP PRACTICING NOW. I BUILT *YOUR* NEW BRAIN, SO THERE'S NOTHING MORE FOR ME TO LEARN.
THAT WAS *SARCASM*. IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH MY BRAIN?
DUNNO. THESE TOOLS ARE NEW TO ME.

CAPTAIN MURTAUGH, VOG IS IN THAT BOTTLE BECAUSE OF A DECISION I MADE, A PATH THAT I PUT US ON.
WHETHER OR NOT I CAN SAVE HIM, I HAVE TO TRY

WHAT WILL YOU DO IF THE PERSON YOU PULL OUT OF THAT BOTTLE ISN'T VOG ANYMORE?

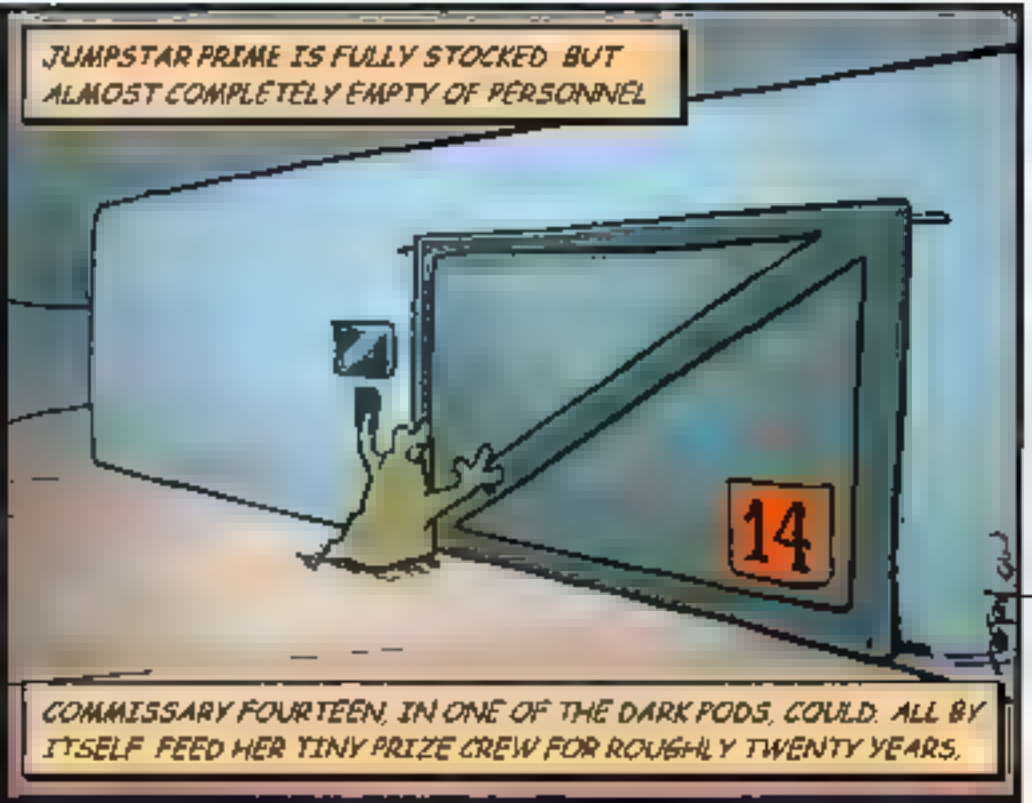
THEN I WILL MEET THAT PERSON, AND HOPE I CAN MAKE A NEW FRIEND.
I'M IN. LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU'RE READY. I'LL BRING DRINKS.

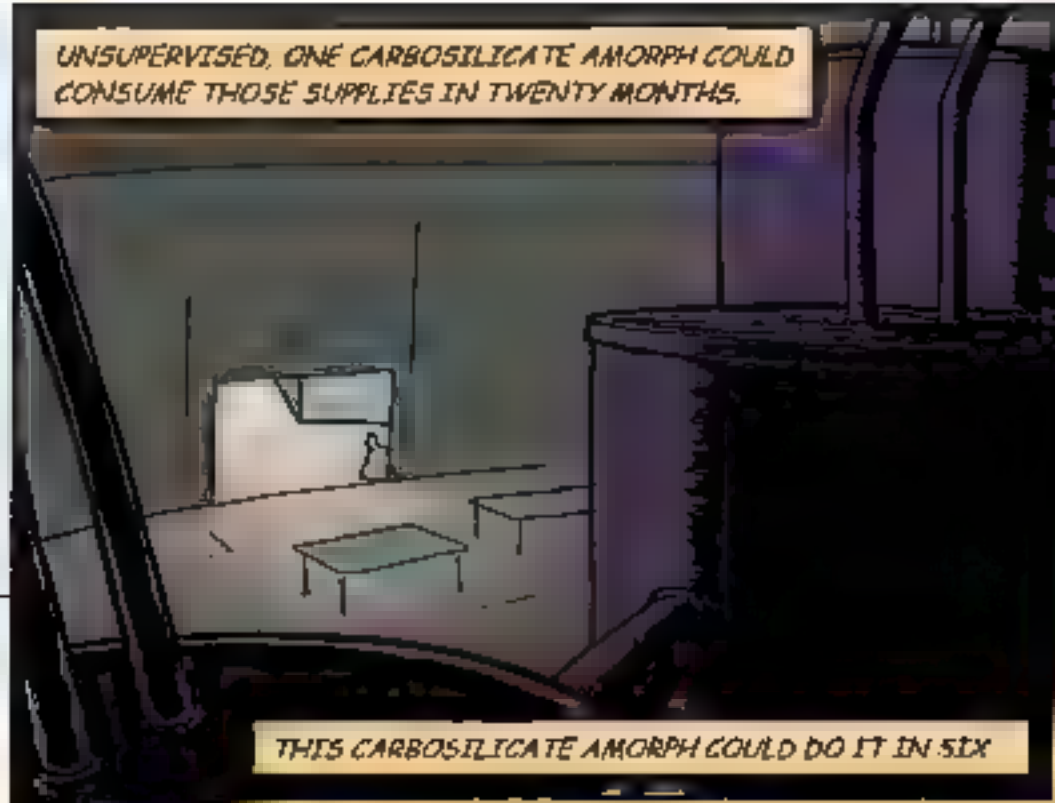
A BATTLEPLATE IS MORE LIKE A DENSELY POPULATED MILITARY BASE THAN A WARSHIP
JUMPSTAR PRIV
AT CAPACITY, THE PODS AND PLAZAS OF A TRICORN-CLASS BATTLEPLATE MIGHT HOUSE A HUNDRED AND TWENTY THOUSAND PERSONNEL, CONTRACTORS, AND DEPENDENTS.
IT IS A MOBILE FORTRESS, A FLYING FACTORY, A COMBINATION PORT AND DRYDOCK, AND A MASSIVE STOCKPILE OF WEAPONS, MATERIEL, AND SUPPLIES.

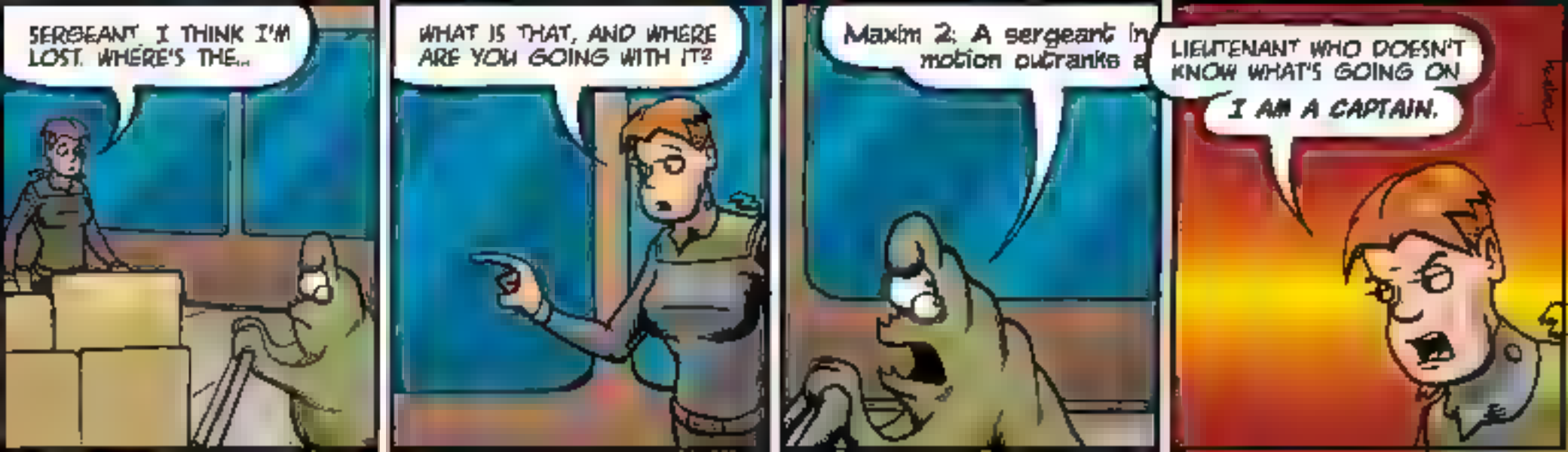
A BATTLEPLATE MIGHT HAVE FIFTY MILLION KILOS OF NON-PERISHABLE NUTRIBLOCKS IN STORAGE

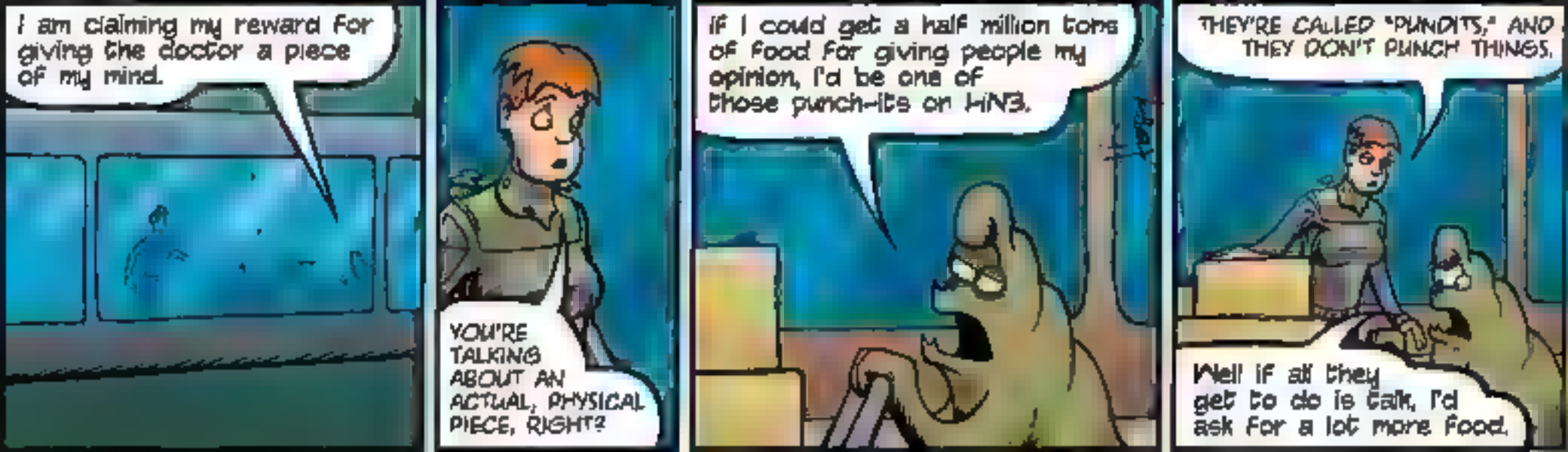
PROPERLY PROCESSED THAT'S ENOUGH TO FEED A HUNDRED THOUSAND PEOPLE FOR SIX MONTHS.

THAT STUFF IS FOR EMERGENCIES. HOWEVER, TEN TIMES THE STORAGE MASS IS DEVOTED TO SUPER-EFFICIENT AGRISYSTEMS, ENSURING INDEFINITE AVAILABILITY OF FRESH FOODS

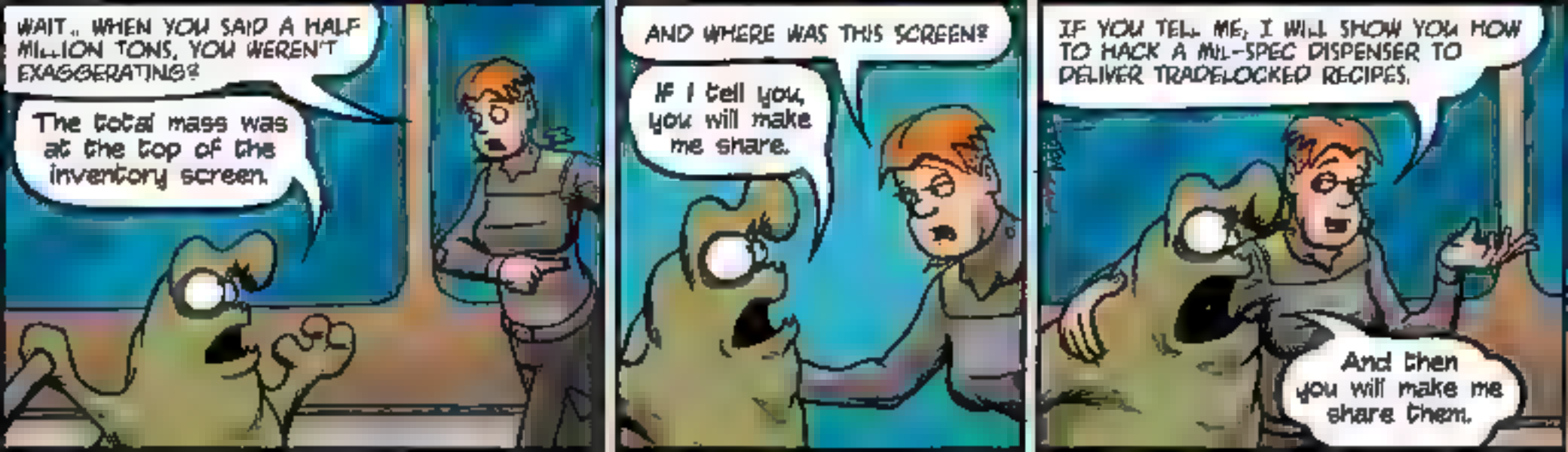

JUMPSTAR PRIME IS FULLY STOCKED BUT ALMOST COMPLETELY EMPTY OF PERSONNEL
14
COMMISSARY FOURTEEN, IN ONE OF THE DARK PODS, COULD, ALL BY ITSELF FEED HER TINY PRIZE CREW FOR ROUGHLY TWENTY YEARS.


UNSUPERVISED, ONE CARBOSILICATE AMORPH COULD CONSUME THOSE SUPPLIES IN TWENTY MONTHS.
THIS CARBOSILICATE AMORPH COULD DO IT IN SIX


SERGEANT, I THINK I'M LOST. WHERE'S THE...
WHAT IS THAT, AND WHERE ARE YOU GOING WITH IT?
Maxim 2: A sergeant in motion outranks a
LIEUTENANT WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON
I AM A CAPTAIN.


I am claiming my reward for giving the doctor a piece of my mind.
YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT AN ACTUAL, PHYSICAL PIECE, RIGHT?
If I could get a half million tons of food for giving people my opinion, I'd be one of those punch-its on HN3.
THEY'RE CALLED "PUNDITS," AND THEY DON'T PUNCH THINGS.
Well if all they get to do is talk, I'd ask for a lot more food.

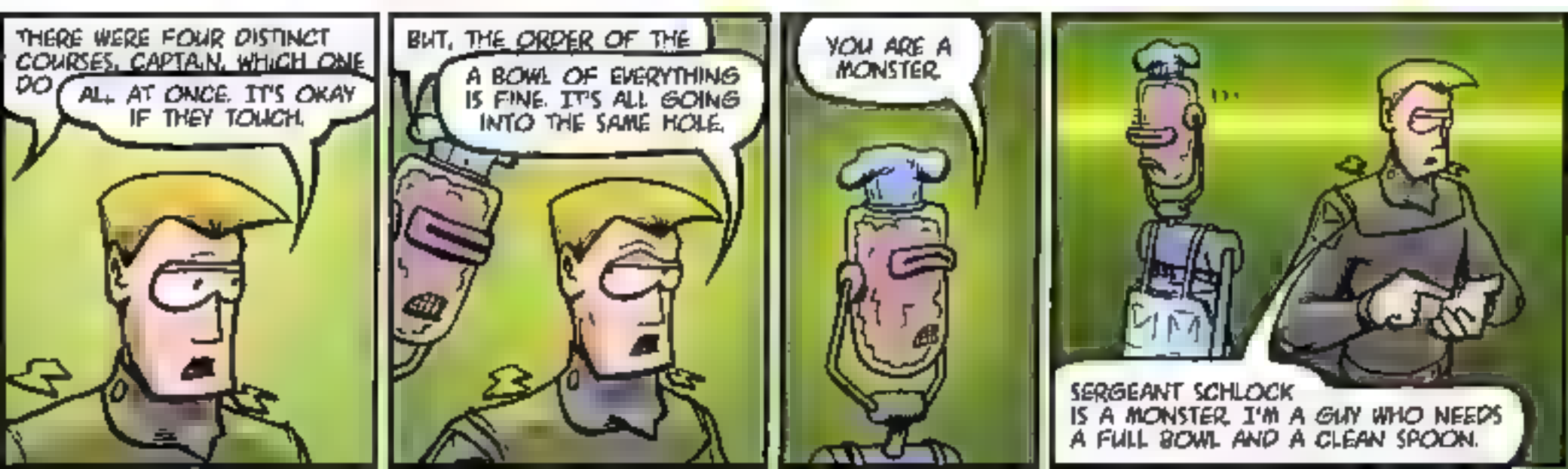
THAT FOOD YOU'VE GOT ON YOUR HOVERJACK ISN'T FOOD YET, YOU KNOW.
THOSE ARE NUTRIFUEL CARTRIDGES. YOU NEED A DISPENSER TO TURN THEM INTO THINGS THAT ARE ACTUALLY EDIBLE.
HOW MANY OF THEM HAVE YOU EATEN?
IF there's a machine to make them taste better, I'll get it on my next trip.

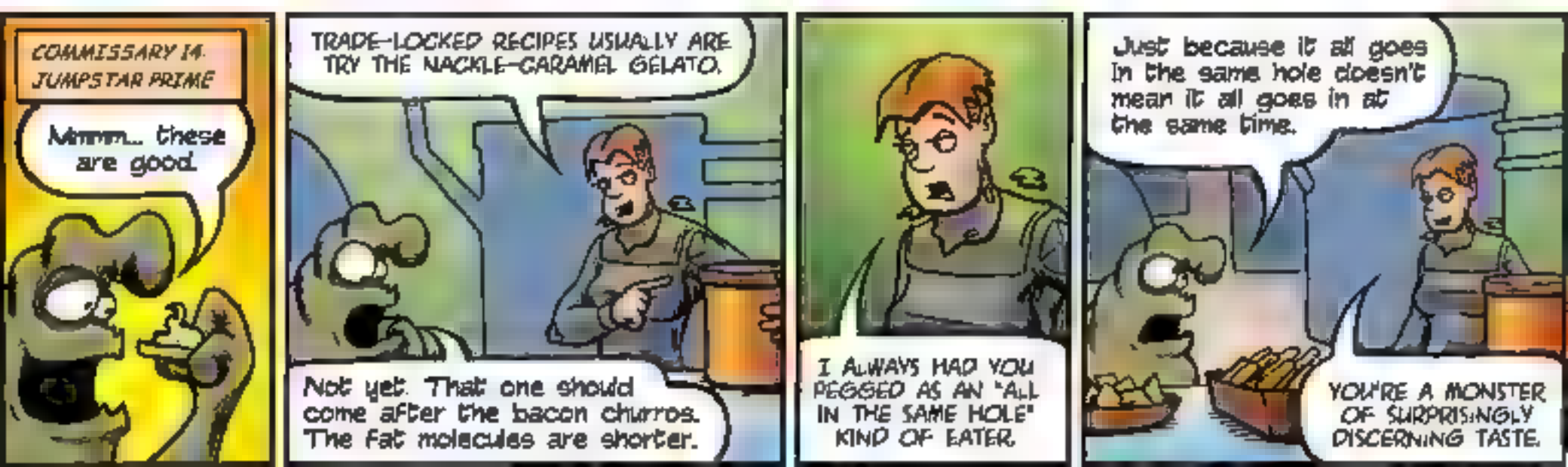

WAIT... WHEN YOU SAID A HALF MILLION TONS, YOU WEREN'T EXAGGERATING?
The total mass was at the top of the inventory screen.
AND WHERE WAS THIS SCREEN?
If I tell you, you will make me share.
IF YOU TELL ME, I WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO HACK A MIL-SPEC DISPENSER TO DELIVER TRADELOCKED RECIPES.
And then you will make me share them.

YOU OBVIOUSLY GOT KEY CODES FOR ONE OF THE DARK PODS.
BUT WHY BE GREEDY? WE ARE ALREADY UNSPEAKABLY WEALTHY, AND THERE IS MORE FOOD IN THAT POD THAN YOU CAN EAT IN TEN YEARS.
Will it keep that long? How fast do I need to be eating?
WILL YOU EVER STOP MISSING THE POINT OF ANY SENTENCE THAT HAPPENS TO HAVE THE WORD "FOOD" IN IT?
Your point is I should already be eating this stuff.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER.
YOU WON'T REGRET THIS.
That depends on how much you eat.
VENTURA, CAN YOU REMOTELY JAILBREAK A PMH-44 FABBERCHOW?
YES SIR. WHAT'S COOKING?
OVALKWIK, CHURROS, AND GRATITUDE.
You didn't tell me you were going to have someone else do it.
THE BRASS KNOWS HOW TO DO IT BY KNOWING WHO CAN DO IT

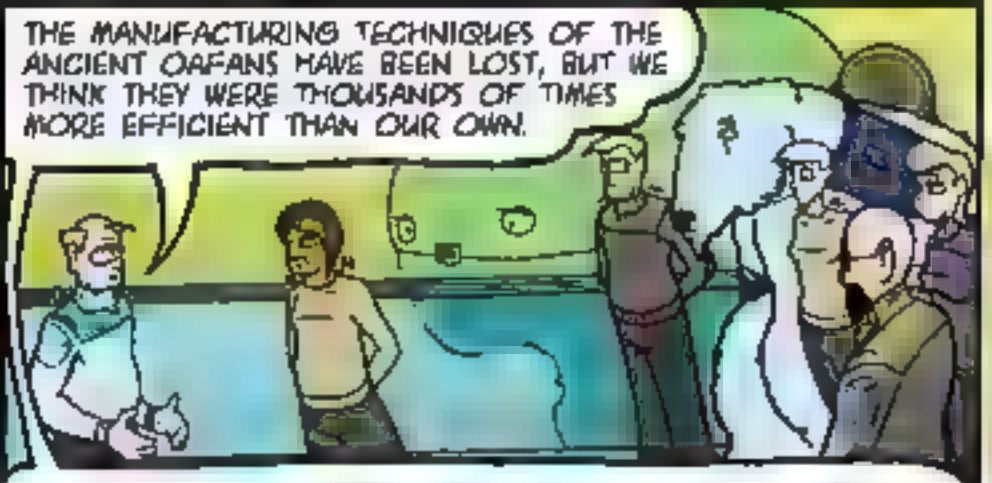
THE COMMODORE'S TABLE BROKEN WIND.
SORRY I'M LATE, EVERYONE. WHAT DID I MISS?
DINNER. WE'VE GOTTEN TO THE TALKING BIT
UNDERSTOOD. CHEF, SCRAPE UP A BOWL FOR ME AND I'LL SHOVEL THINGS IN WHILE I LISTEN AND CATCH UP.


THERE WERE FOUR DISTINCT COURSES, CAPTAIN. WHICH ONE DO
ALL AT ONCE. IT'S OKAY IF THEY TOUCH.
BUT, THE ORDER OF THE
A BOWL OF EVERYTHING IS FINE. IT'S ALL GOING INTO THE SAME HOLE.
YOU ARE A MONSTER.
SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS A MONSTER. I'M A GUY WHO NEEDS A FULL BOWL AND A CLEAN SPOON.


COMMISSARY 14. JUMPSTAR PRIME
Mmmm... these are good.
TRADE-LOCKED RECIPES USUALLY ARE. TRY THE NACKLE-CARAMEL GELATO.
Not yet. That one should come after the bacon churros. The fat molecules are shorter.
I ALWAYS HAD YOU PEGGED AS AN "ALL IN THE SAME HOLE" KIND OF EATER.
Just because it all goes in the same hole doesn't mean it all goes in at the same time.
YOU'RE A MONSTER OF SURPRISINGLY DISCERNING TASTE.

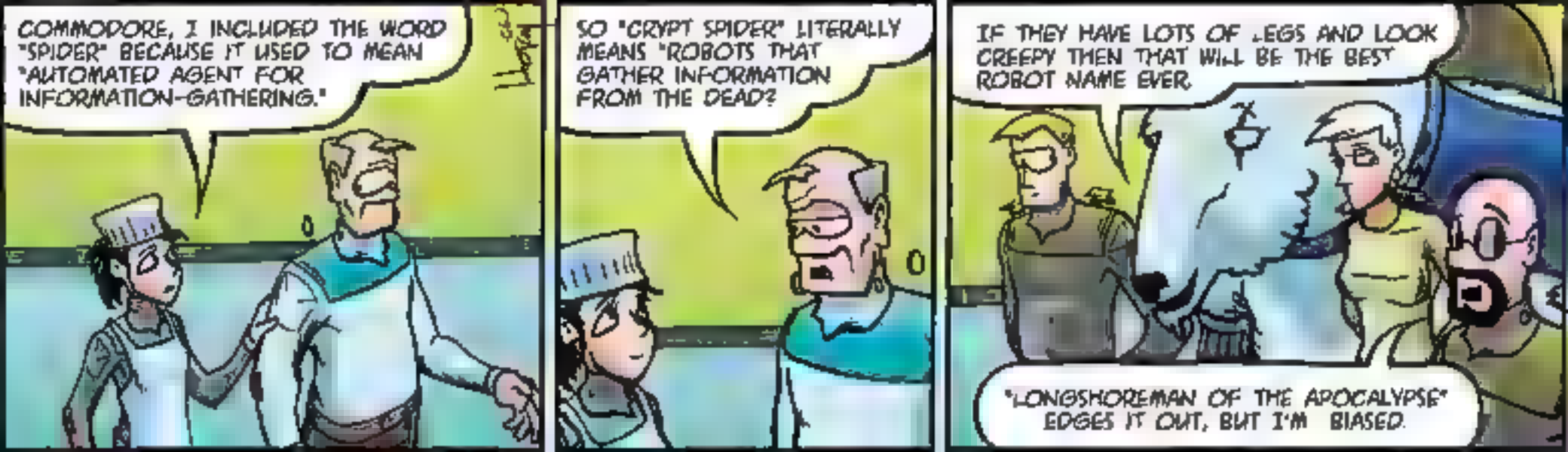
CAPTAIN TAGON?
CAPTAIN SORLIE. CAPTAIN LANDON.
AS NEWLY-MINTED CAPTAINS, WE HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU.
WELL, WHATEVER YOU'RE ASKING, I BET YOU WON'T LIKE THE ANSWER.
IS YOUR FATHER THE COMMODORE GOING TO GIVE A LONG SPEECH?
I WIN THE BET!
PIPE DOWN SON. I'VE GOT A LOT OF IMPORTANT THINGS TO SAY

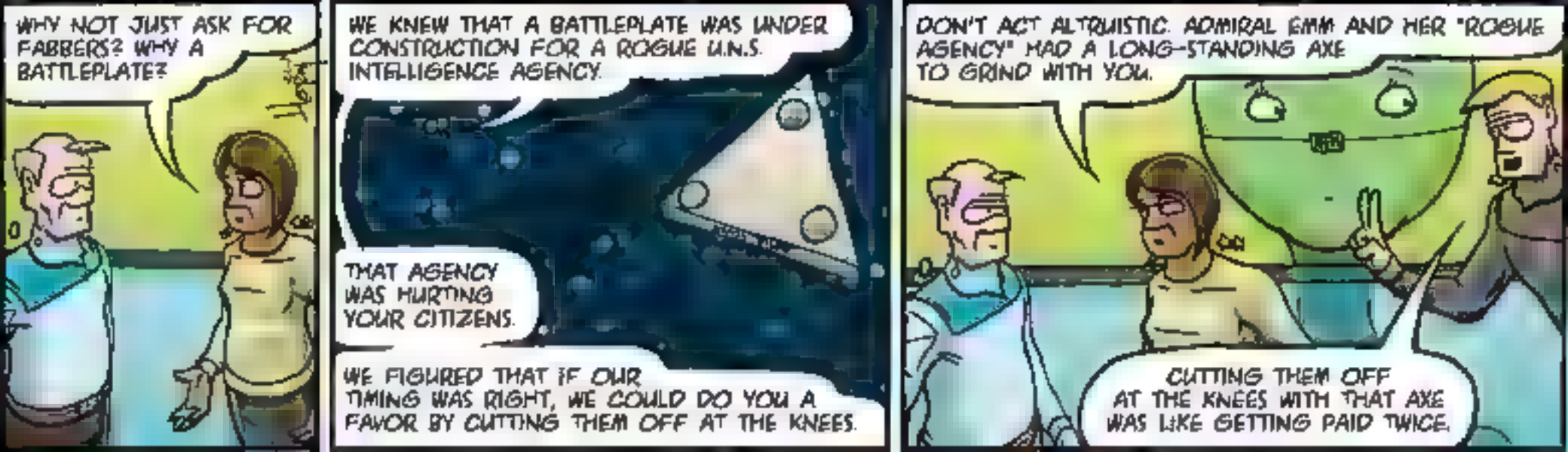
YOU HAVE LOTS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR PLANS REGARDING THE JUMPSTAR PRIME.
WE'RE GOING TO USE HER FABBERS TO BUILD BILLIONS OF CRYPT SPIDERS.
"CRYPT SPIDERS" SOUNDS PRETTY AWESOME.
"YOUR NAME IS IN THE MOUTH OF OTHERS. MAKE SURE IT HAS TEETH."
"SO THEY CAN BITE YOU WITH IT?" THAT MAXIM HAS NEVER MADE SENSE TO ME.

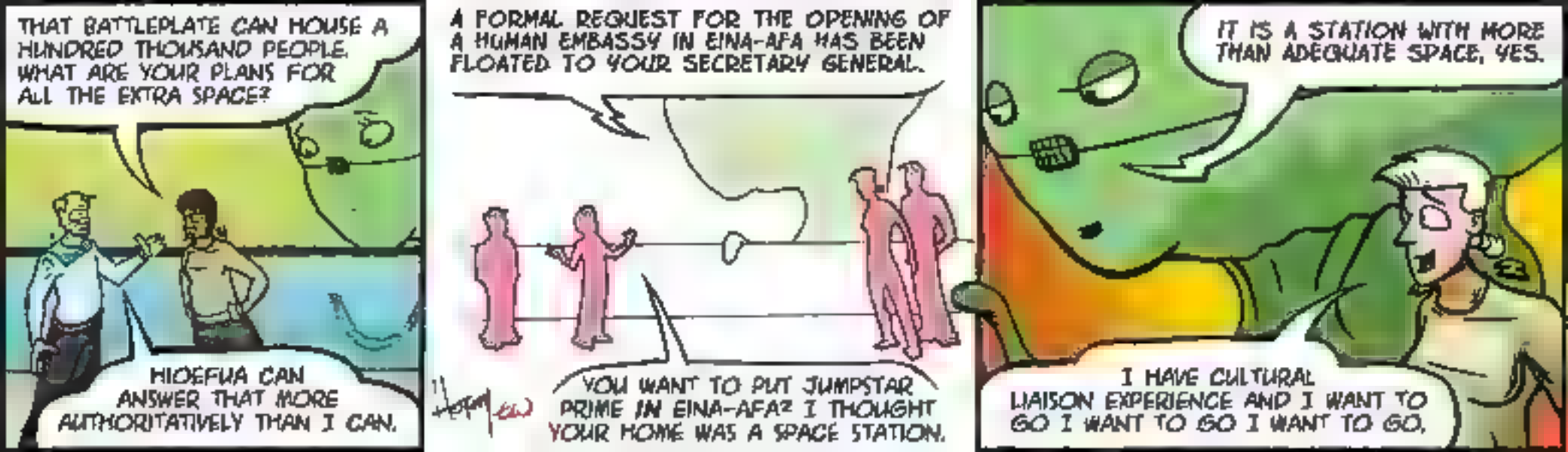

THE MANUFACTURING TECHNIQUES OF THE ANCIENT OAFANS HAVE BEEN LOST, BUT WE THINK THEY WERE THOUSANDS OF TIMES MORE EFFICIENT THAN OUR OWN.
THEIR DEAD WERE LAID TO REST IN GIANT MAUSOLEUMS, AND THROUGH A QUIRK OF OAFAN BIOLOGY, THEIR MEMORIES ARE INSCRIBED IN SCROLLS OF FOIL MADE FROM THEIR SKIN.

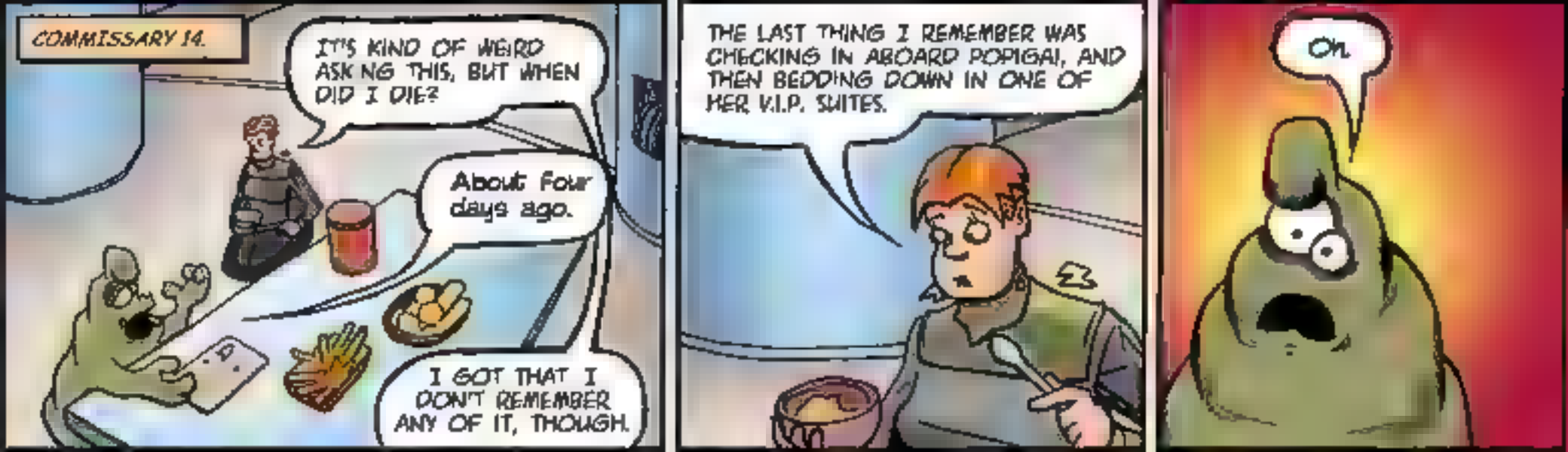
THE CRYPT SPIDER PROJECT IS HOW WE'RE GOING TO READ ALL THOSE SCROLLS.

I GET CRYPT WHY SPIDER?
I THINK BECAUSE IT SOUNDED COOL.

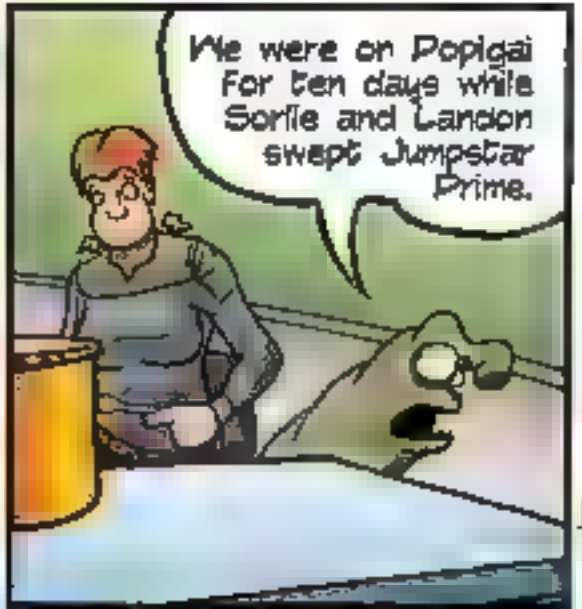

COMMODORE, I INCLUDED THE WORD "SPIDER" BECAUSE IT USED TO MEAN "AUTOMATED AGENT FOR INFORMATION-GATHERING."
SO "CRYPT SPIDER" LITERALLY MEANS "ROBOTS THAT GATHER INFORMATION FROM THE DEAD?
IF THEY HAVE LOTS OF LEGS AND LOOK CREEPY THEN THAT WILL BE THE BEST ROBOT NAME EVER.
"LONGSHOREMAN OF THE APOCALYPSE" EDGES IT OUT, BUT I'M BIASED.


WHY NOT JUST ASK FOR FABBERS? WHY A BATTLEPLATE?
WE KNEW THAT A BATTLEPLATE WAS UNDER CONSTRUCTION FOR A ROGUE U.N.S. INTELLIGENCE AGENCY.
THAT AGENCY WAS HURTING YOUR CITIZENS.
WE FIGURED THAT IF OUR TIMING WAS RIGHT, WE COULD DO YOU A FAVOR BY CUTTING THEM OFF AT THE KNEES.
DON'T ACT ALTRUISTIC. ADMIRAL EMM AND HER "ROGUE AGENCY" HAD A LONG-STANDING AXE TO GRIND WITH YOU.
CUTTING THEM OFF AT THE KNEES WITH THAT AXE WAS LIKE GETTING PAID TWICE.


THAT BATTLEPLATE CAN HOUSE A HUNDRED THOUSAND PEOPLE. WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR ALL THE EXTRA SPACE?
HIDEFUA CAN ANSWER THAT MORE AUTHORITATIVELY THAN I CAN.
A FORMAL REQUEST FOR THE OPENING OF A HUMAN EMBASSY IN EINA-AFA HAS BEEN FLOATED TO YOUR SECRETARY GENERAL.
YOU WANT TO PUT JUMPSTAR PRIME IN EINA-AFA? I THOUGHT YOUR HOME WAS A SPACE STATION.
IT IS A STATION WITH MORE THAN ADEQUATE SPACE, YES.
I HAVE CULTURAL LIAISON EXPERIENCE AND I WANT TO GO I WANT TO GO I WANT TO GO.


COMMISSARY 14.
IT'S KIND OF WEIRD ASKING THIS, BUT WHEN DID I DIE?
About four days ago.
I GOT THAT I DON'T REMEMBER ANY OF IT, THOUGH.
THE LAST THING I REMEMBER WAS CHECKING IN ABOARD POPIGAI, AND THEN BEDDING DOWN IN ONE OF HER V.I.P. SUITES.
Oh.

I DON'T LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT "OH."

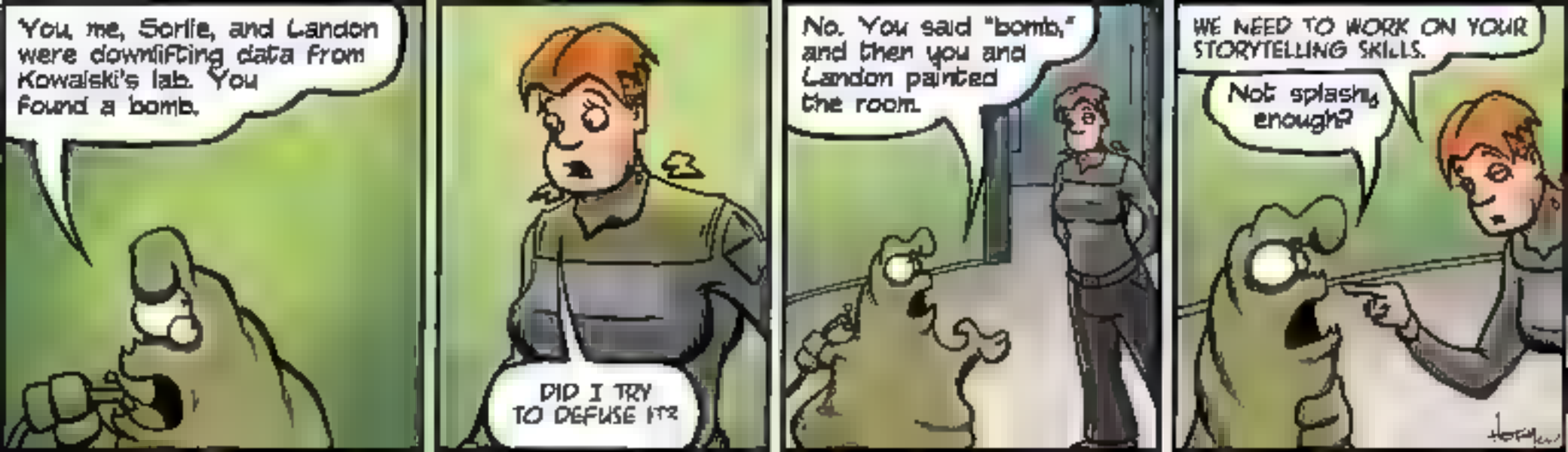

We were on Popigai for ten days while Sorlie and Landon swept Jumpstar Prime.

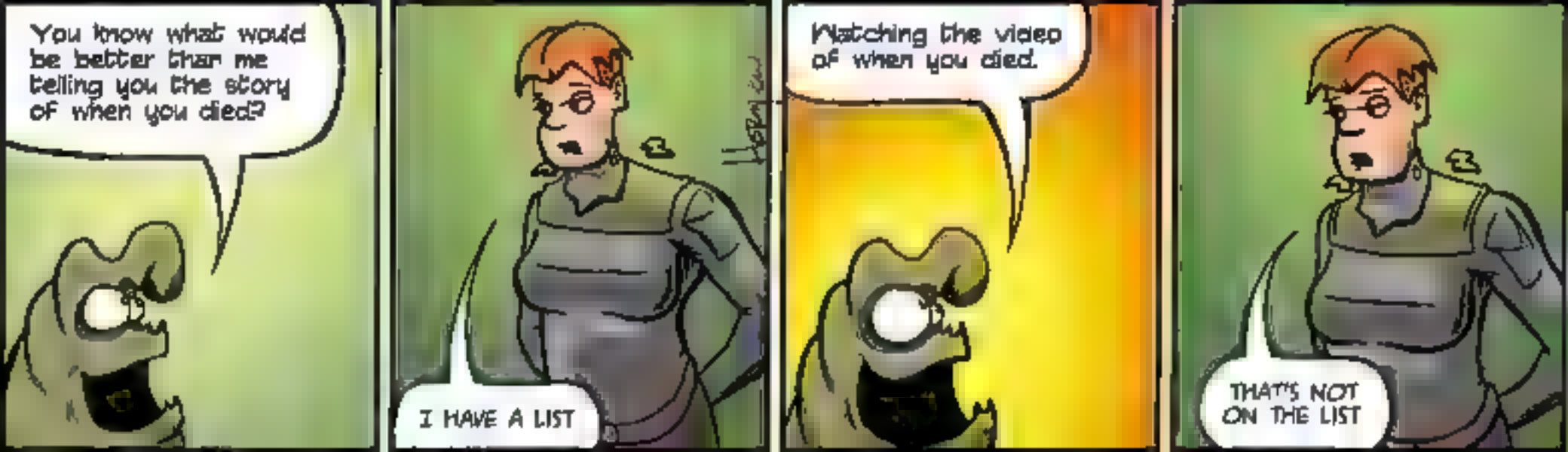
I LOST TEN DAYS...
Plus the four when you were dead.

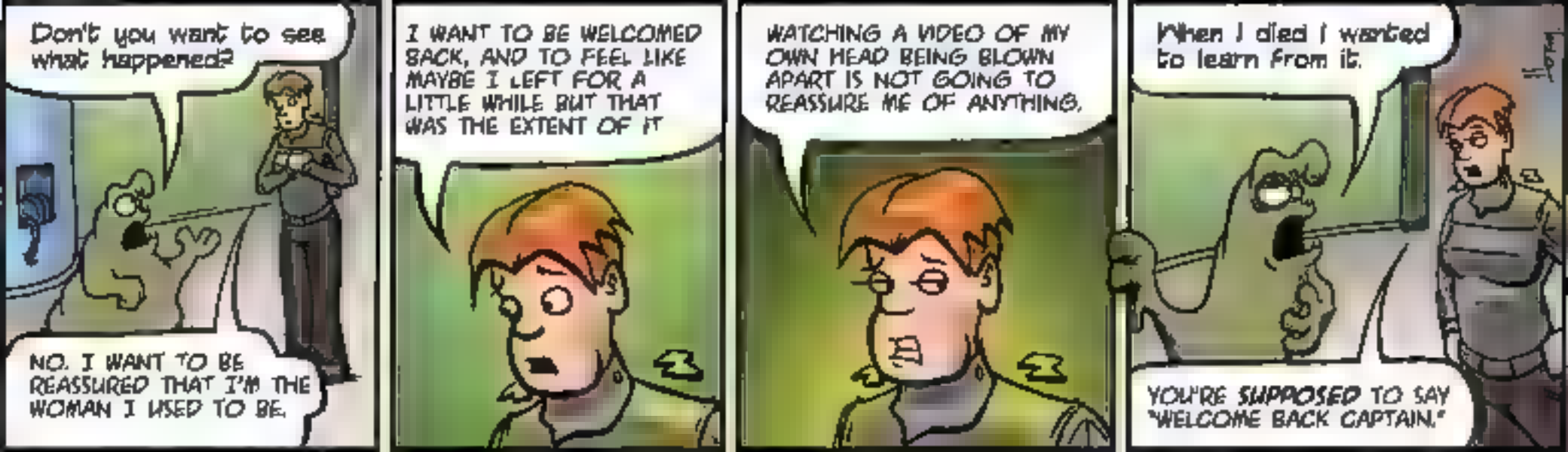
ON WHICH OF THOSE DAYS DID WE DECIDE TO NAME THIS BATTLEPLATE JUMPSTAR PRIME?

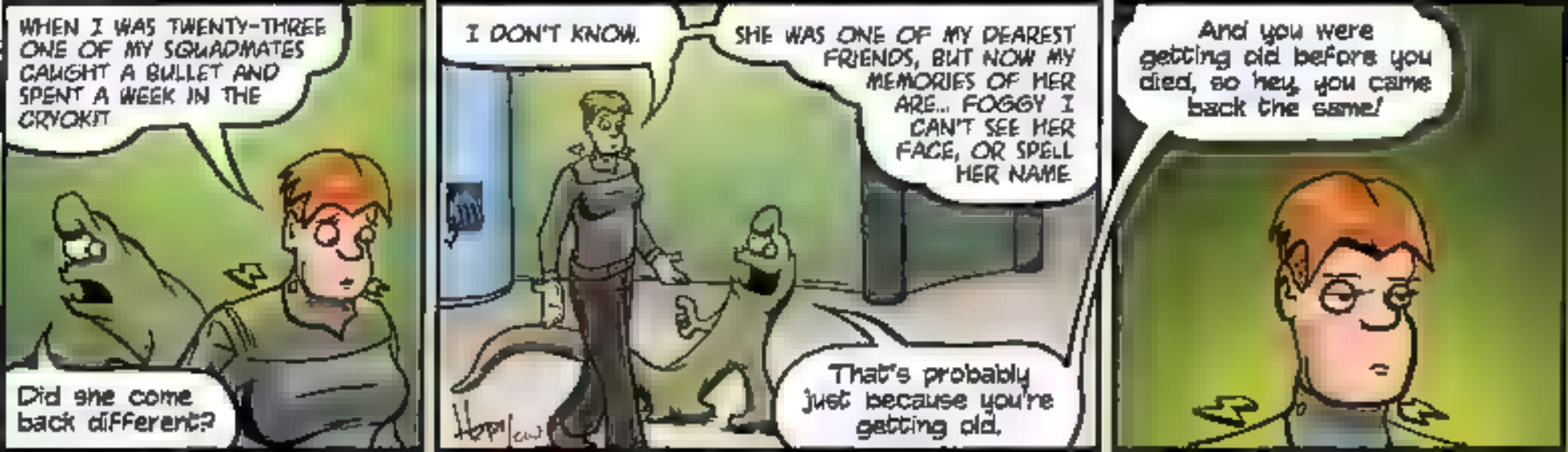
That was today.
This morning, at on-awesome-thirty.

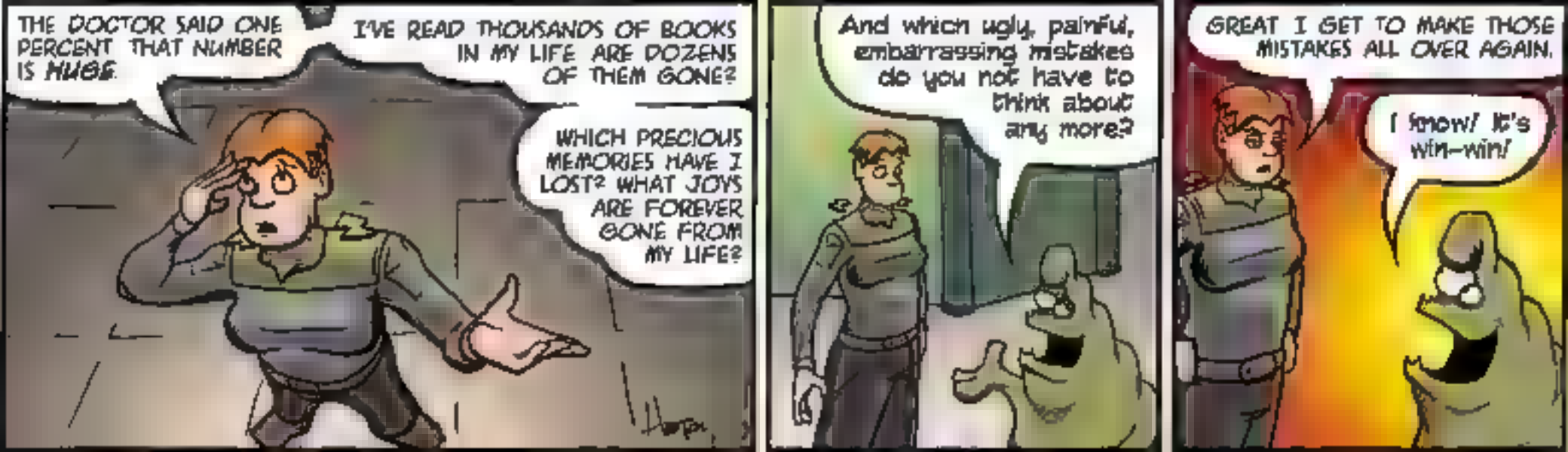
OF ALL THE TIME I'VE LOST, I THINK THAT LOSING ON-AWESOME-THIRTY HURTS THE MOST
TAR PRIME!
Commander Foxworthy didn't like missing it either


You, me, Sorlie, and Landon were downlifting data from Kowalski's lab. You found a bomb.
DID I TRY TO DEFUSE IT?
No. You said "bomb," and then you and Landon painted the room.
WE NEED TO WORK ON YOUR STORYTELLING SKILLS.
Not splashy enough?

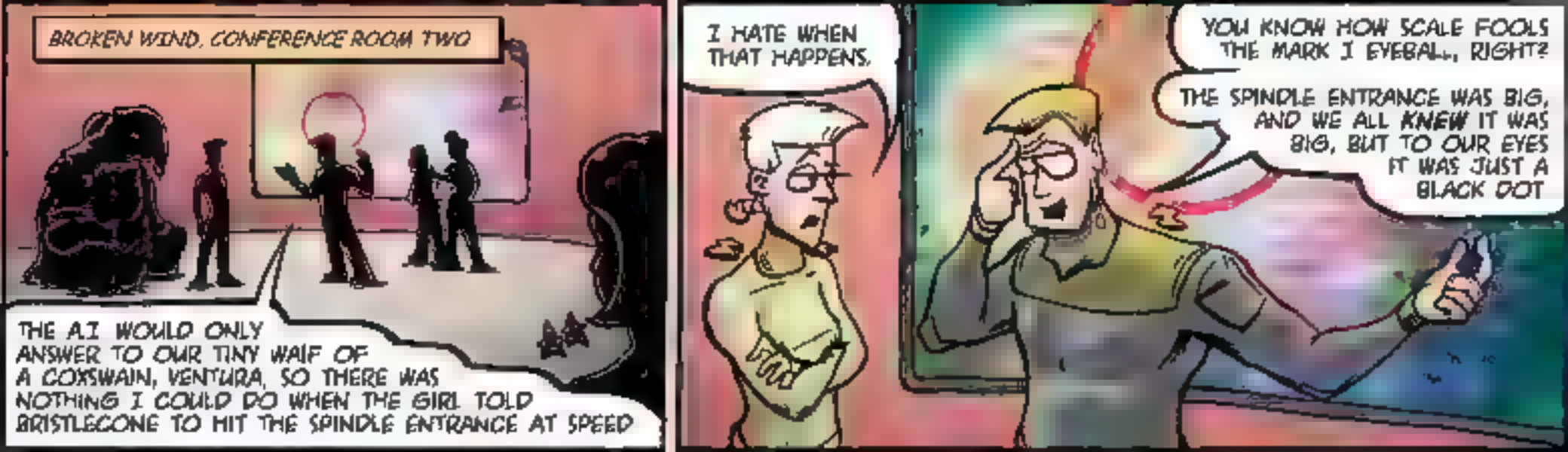

You know what would be better than me telling you the story of when you died?
I HAVE A LIST
Watching the video of when you died.
THAT'S NOT ON THE LIST


Don't you want to see what happened?
NO. I WANT TO BE REASSURED THAT I'M THE WOMAN I USED TO BE.
I WANT TO BE WELCOMED BACK, AND TO FEEL LIKE MAYBE I LEFT FOR A LITTLE WHILE BUT THAT WAS THE EXTENT OF IT
WATCHING A VIDEO OF MY OWN HEAD BEING BLOWN APART IS NOT GOING TO REASSURE ME OF ANYTHING.
When I died I wanted to learn from it.
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO SAY "WELCOME BACK CAPTAIN."

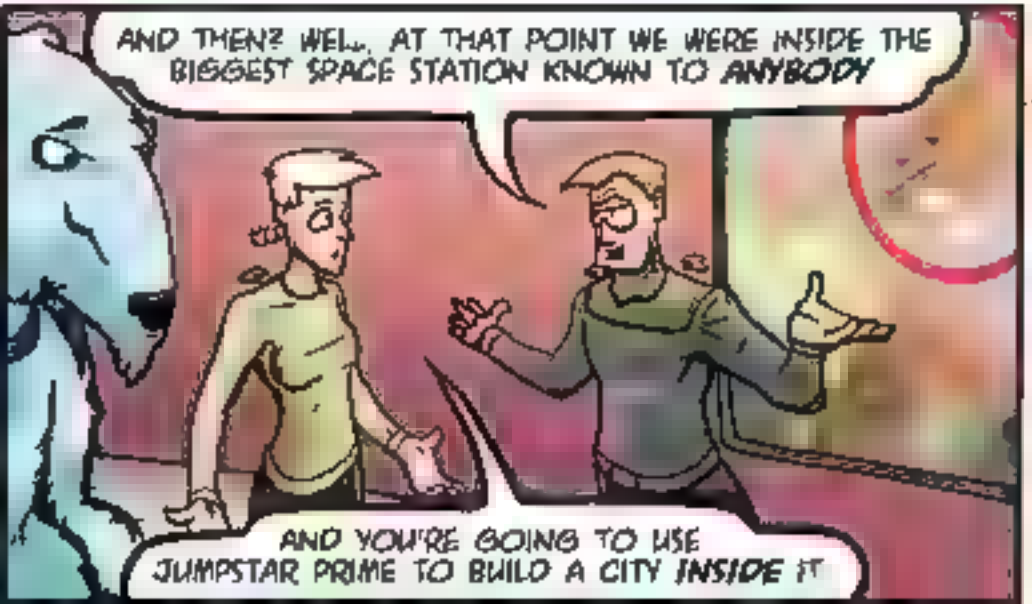

WHEN I WAS TWENTY-THREE ONE OF MY SQUADMATES CAUGHT A BULLET AND SPENT A WEEK IN THE CRYOKIT
Did she come back different?
I DON'T KNOW.
SHE WAS ONE OF MY DEAREST FRIENDS, BUT NOW MY MEMORIES OF HER ARE... FOGGY I CAN'T SEE HER FACE, OR SPELL HER NAME
That's probably just because you're getting old.
And you were getting old before you died, so hey, you came back the same!

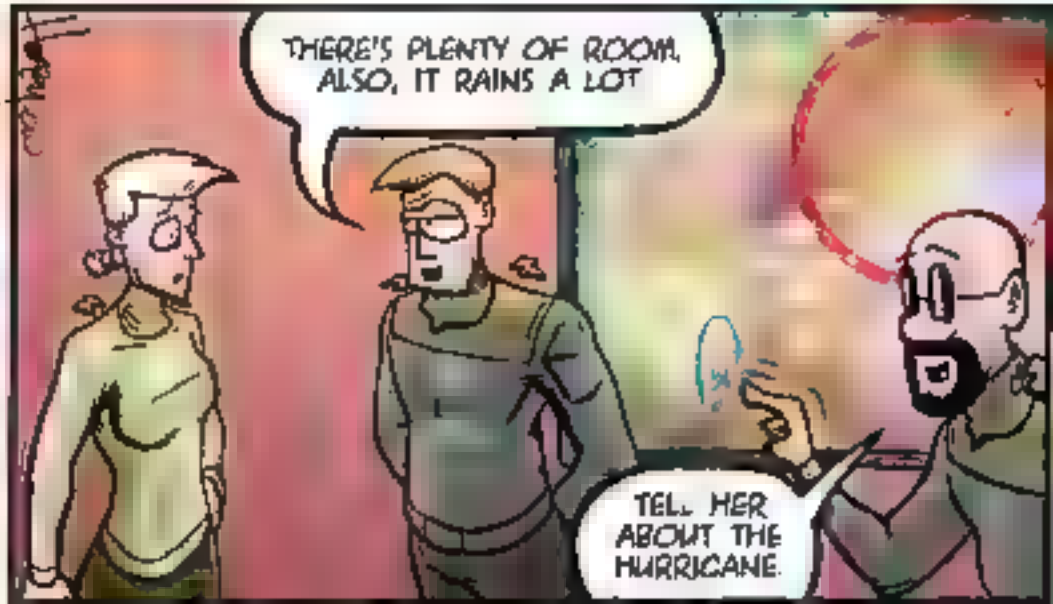

THE DOCTOR SAID ONE PERCENT THAT NUMBER IS HUGE.
I'VE READ THOUSANDS OF BOOKS IN MY LIFE ARE DOZENS OF THEM GONE?
WHICH PRECIOUS MEMORIES HAVE I LOST? WHAT JOYS ARE FOREVER GONE FROM MY LIFE?
And which ugly, painful, embarrassing mistakes do you not have to think about any more?
GREAT I GET TO MAKE THOSE MISTAKES ALL OVER AGAIN.
I know! It's win-win!

YOU'RE RIGHT. YOU'RE NOT HELPING ME MUCH. I SHOULDN'T HAVE INTERRUPTED YOUR LOOTING.
Wait... are we having one of those things where one person talks about how they feel and the other person mostly just listens and makes helpful noises and then the feely-talky person cries but feels better anyway?
Because I don't usually get invited to those.
CLEARLY THE "TENDER MOMENT IN THE COMMISSARY" DUTY ROSTER SHOULD BE UPDATED.


BROKEN WIND, CONFERENCE ROOM TWO
THE A.I. WOULD ONLY ANSWER TO OUR TINY WAIF OF A COXSWAIN, VENTURA, SO THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD DO WHEN THE GIRL TOLD BRISTLECONE TO HIT THE SPINDLE ENTRANCE AT SPEED
I HATE WHEN THAT HAPPENS.
YOU KNOW HOW SCALE FOOLS THE MARK I EYEBALL, RIGHT?
THE SPINDLE ENTRANCE WAS BIG, AND WE ALL KNEW IT WAS BIG, BUT TO OUR EYES IT WAS JUST A BLACK DOT

WELL, IT STARTS TO GROW, AND WE'RE COMING IN HOTTER THAN SOME MUNITIONS DO, AND FOR JUST A MOMENT I THOUGHT "THIS IS IT THIS IS WHERE I DIE."
I TAKE IT YOU LIVED.
CORPORAL NICHOLSON HAD ASKED WHETHER THE OPENING WAS BIG ENOUGH FOR SHIPS.
VENTURA, SAID WE COULD PARK BATTLEPLATES IN IT.
BEFORE ANYBODY COULD ASK "HOW MANY" SHE SAID "ALL OF THEM."
WE CROSSED THE LAST THOUSAND KLICKS OF APPROACH, AND IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE THAT TINY DOT WAS AN OCEAN OF BLACKNESS, AND WE DOVE STRAIGHT DOWN.

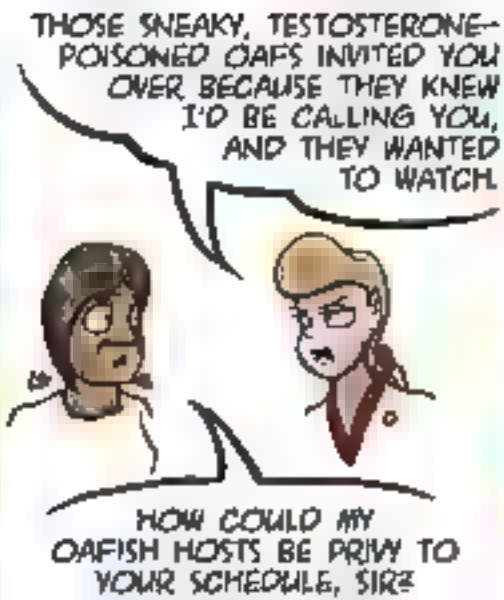

AND THEN? WELL, AT THAT POINT WE WERE INSIDE THE BIGGEST SPACE STATION KNOWN TO ANYBODY
AND YOU'RE GOING TO USE JUMPSTAR PRIME TO BUILD A CITY INSIDE IT


THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM. ALSO, IT RAINS A LOT
TELL HER ABOUT THE HURRICANE.

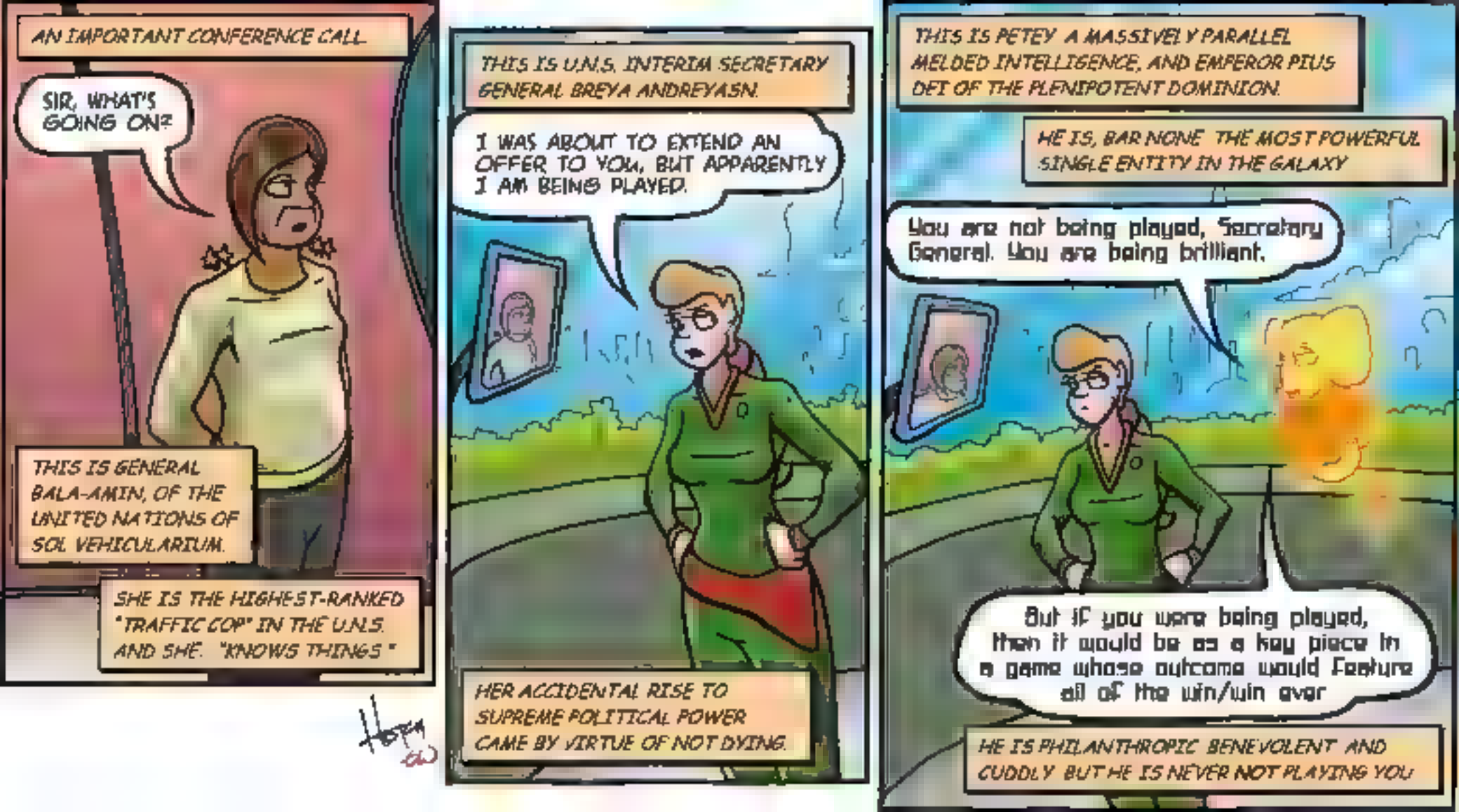
YOUR BOY TELLS A PRETTY GOOD STORY
HE DOES.
IS HE STALLING FOR TIME?
EXCUSE ME, GENERAL. YOU HAVE A CALL FROM SECGEN SIX ACTUAL.
NO, HE'S DONE.

GENERAL BALA-AMIN, DO YOU HAVE A MOMENT TO TALK?
I HAVE HOWEVER MANY MOMENTS YOU REQUIRE, SECRETARY GENERAL, SIR. I CAN ALWAYS MAKE MORE

VERY GOOD. I– WAIT... IS THAT TAGON IN THE BACKGROUND?
BOTH OF THE TAGONS, YES.


THOSE SNEAKY, TESTOSTERONE-POISONED OAFS INVITED YOU OVER BECAUSE THEY KNEW I'D BE CALLING YOU, AND THEY WANTED TO WATCH.
HOW COULD MY OAFISH HOSTS BE PRIVY TO YOUR SCHEDULE, SIR?

SECRETARY GENERAL, YOU HAVE A CONFERENCE REQUEST FROM THE PLENIPOTENT DOMINION.
WELL, SPEAK OF THE PRIVY


AN IMPORTANT CONFERENCE CALL.
SIR, WHAT'S GOING ON?
THIS IS GENERAL BALA-AMIN, OF THE UNITED NATIONS OF SOL VEHICULARIUM.
SHE IS THE HIGHEST-RANKED "TRAFFIC COP" IN THE U.N.S. AND SHE. "KNOWS THINGS."
THIS IS U.N.S. INTERIM SECRETARY GENERAL BREYA ANDREYASN.
I WAS ABOUT TO EXTEND AN OFFER TO YOU, BUT APPARENTLY I AM BEING PLAYED.
HER ACCIDENTAL RISE TO SUPREME POLITICAL POWER CAME BY VIRTUE OF NOT DYING.
THIS IS PETEY A MASSIVELY PARALLEL MELDED INTELLIGENCE, AND EMPEROR PIUS DEI OF THE PLENIPOTENT DOMINION.
HE IS, BAR NONE THE MOST POWERFUL SINGLE ENTITY IN THE GALAXY
You are not being played, Secretary General. You are being brilliant.
But if you were being played, then it would be as a key piece in a game whose outcome would feature all of the win/win ever
HE IS PHILANTHROPIC BENEVOLENT AND CUDDLY BUT HE IS NEVER NOT PLAYING YOU

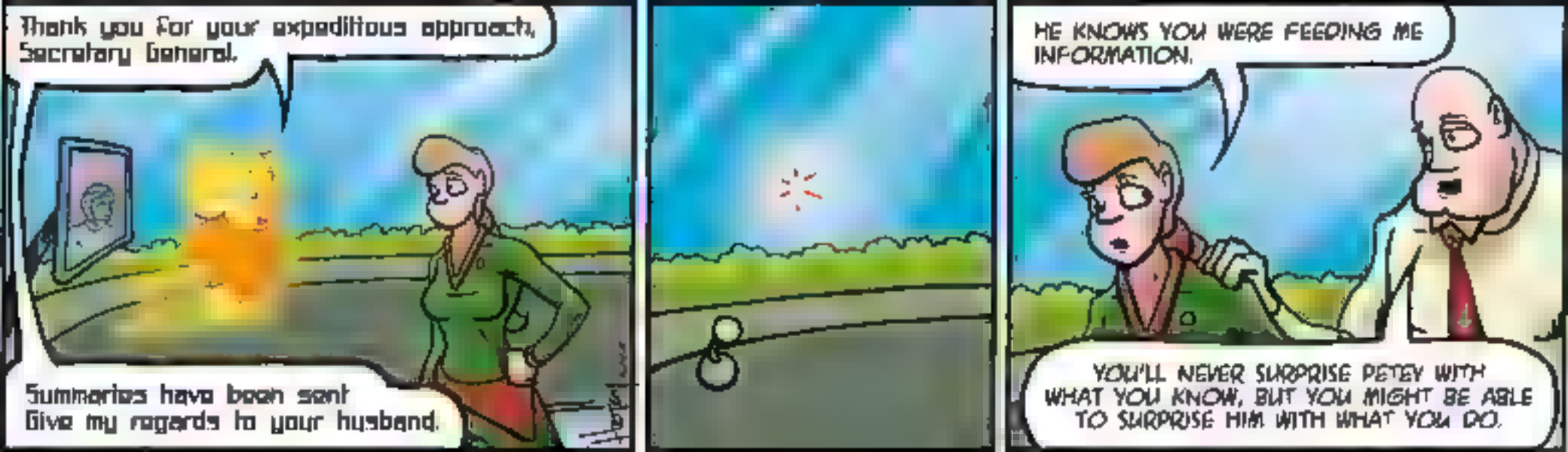
Breya, have you extended the job offer to General Bala-Amin yet?
SHE HASN'T. IS THIS THE "AMBASSADOR TO EINA-AFA" POSITION?
It is.
I'LL BE ACCEPTING THAT.
BUT YOU'LL BE WAITING FOR ME TO ACTUALLY EXTEND THE OFFER, YES?
I WAS JUST TRYING TO SAVE TIME. I SUSPECT THIS CALL IS WORTH MORE PER MINUTE THAN I'LL MAKE FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE.

FORMALLY, THEN, GENERAL WILL YOU SERVE AS AMBASSADOR TO EINA-AFA?
YOU WILL? GOOD.
PRESCIENCE IS SUCH A TIME-SAVER!

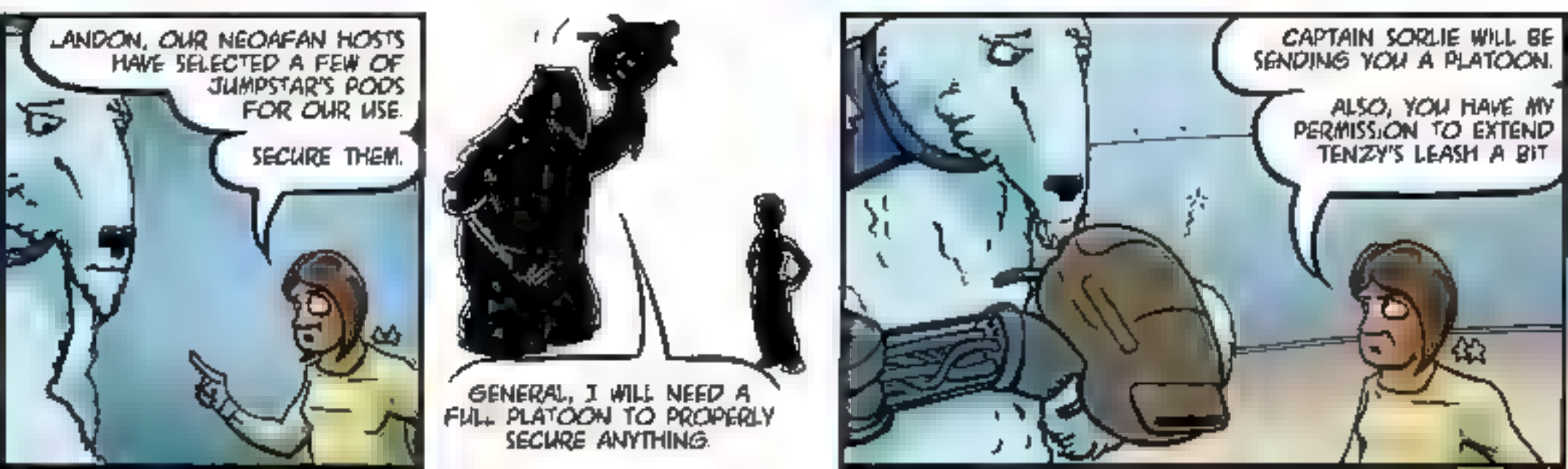
I CAN SEE WHY YOU OPERATE THE WAY YOU DO, EMPEROR.
NOW, MAY WE SKIP YOUR LECTURE ON THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF EINA-AFA IN THE EVER-ESCALATING CONFLICT SOON TO BE KNOWN AS "THE BARYON WARS?"

AFTER ALL, YOU AND I BOTH KNOW THE MATERIAL, AND OUR NEW AMBASSADOR CAN JUST READ A SUMMARY.

We had that coming.
I'M SURE WE DID WHAT JUST HAPPENED?


Thank you for your expeditious approach, Secretary General.
Summaries have been sent
Give my regards to your husband.
HE KNOWS YOU WERE FEEDING ME INFORMATION.
YOU'LL NEVER SURPRISE PETEY WITH WHAT YOU KNOW, BUT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO SURPRISE HIM WITH WHAT YOU DO.

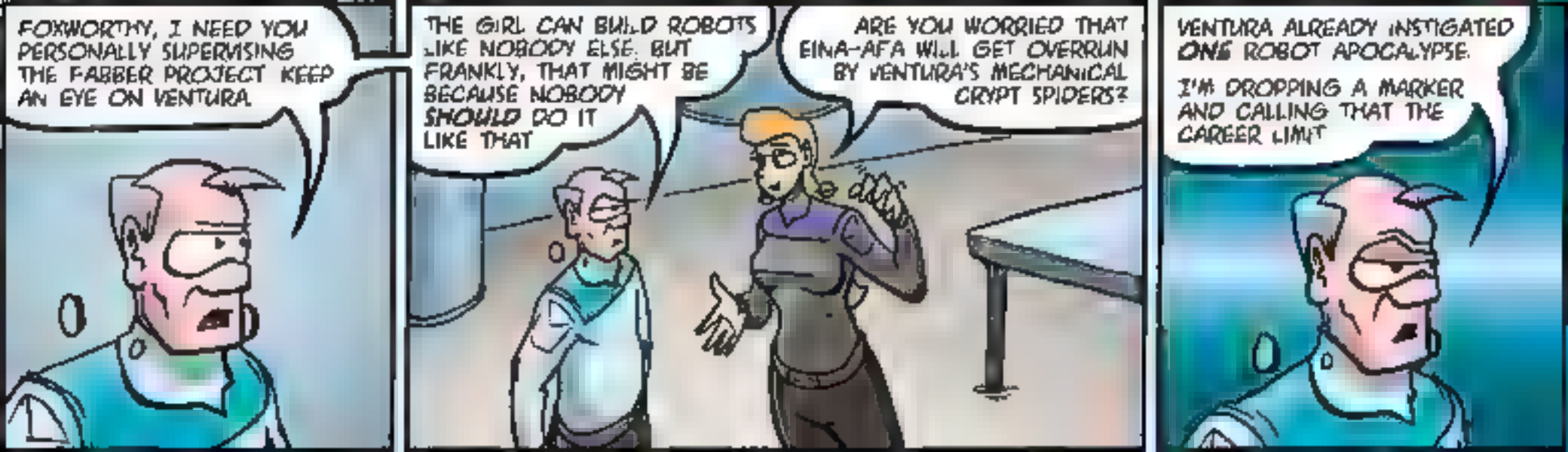
SORLIE, LANDON, ON ME...
WHAT DO YOU NEED, SIR?
I'M AN AMBASSADOR NOW. I NEED AN EMBASSY
SORLIE, TAKE MY SHOPPING LIST BACK TO CHESAPEAKE ADD TO IT AS YOU SEE FIT
YOU MAY CONSCRIPT A FEW VALUABLE ASSETS WHO DO NOT VOLUNTEER, BUT ONLY A FEW.


LANDON, OUR NEOAFAN HOSTS HAVE SELECTED A FEW OF JUMPSTAR'S PODS FOR OUR USE.
SECURE THEM.
GENERAL, I WILL NEED A FULL PLATOON TO PROPERLY SECURE ANYTHING.
CAPTAIN SORLIE WILL BE SENDING YOU A PLATOON.
ALSO, YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO EXTEND TENZY'S LEASH A BIT

TENZY IS UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE WORD "LEASH," GENERAL. IT MAKES HER FEEL LIKE A PET
CAPTAIN, I'M UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE SYMBIOSIS YOU HAVE WITH YOUR SENTIENT WEAPON. IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE HALF A PERSON.
I could complete you.
YOU'LL HAVE TO SETTLE FOR COMPLETING MISSIONS.

THANK YOU FOR JOINING US FOR DINNER. PER YOUR EXAMPLE, I NEED TO PUT MY CAPTAINS BACK TO WORK.
I UNDERSTAND. I'LL WAIT.
VERY... HANG ON. WAIT FOR WHAT?
FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO FINISH OUR CONVERSATION.
BECAUSE I KNOW WE WEREN'T DONE. YOU STILL HAVE SECRETS.

ANDREYASN, HAVE CINDERCONE READY TO BRACE CARGO BY 0900 TOMMOROW.
NO PROBLEM. VENTURA'S ON IT ALREADY.
NOT ANYMORE. I NEED VENTURA PREPPING FABBERS ON JUMPSTAR PRIME.
CAN DO, BUT I MIGHT HAVE TO SUIT UP MYSELF TO HIT AN 0900 DEPARTURE.
I SURE HOPE NOT, CAPTAIN. IF YOU GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY ON THE LITTLE JOBS, YOU'VE FAILED AT YOUR BIGGEST JOB
TAKE THIS MOMENT, AND THEN CLOSE YOUR EYES AND TRY TO IMAGINE MY ENTIRE CHILDHOOD.


FOXWORTHY, I NEED YOU PERSONALLY SUPERVISING THE FABBER PROJECT. KEEP AN EYE ON VENTURA.
THE GIRL CAN BUILD ROBOTS LIKE NOBODY ELSE. BUT FRANKLY, THAT MIGHT BE BECAUSE NOBODY *SHOULD* DO IT LIKE THAT.
ARE YOU WORRIED THAT EINA-AFA WILL GET OVERRUN BY VENTURA'S MECHANICAL CRYPT SPIDERS?
VENTURA ALREADY INSTIGATED *ONE* ROBOT APOCALYPSE.
I'M DROPPING A MARKER AND CALLING THAT THE CAREER LIMIT.

CAPTAIN LANDON, I'M ON MY WAY BACK TO THE J.P.
DO YOU NEED A ...

WHERE DID THOSE COME FROM?
I FED TENZY SOME TABLE SCRAPS.
SHE CAN POP DRONES PRETTY QUICKLY WHEN ASKED TO.

NOT THIRTY SECONDS AGO I GOT ORDERS TO PREVENT A ROBOT APOCALYPSE.
Oh, I would love to help with that

HOW DID THE WARGAME GO AFTER I LEFT?
I WON.
REALLY? YOU WERE OUTNUMBERED AND PINNED DOWN.
YOU GAVE ME EVERYBODY'S POSITION. I JUST HAD TO BE QUICK AND ACCURATE.
AND NOT ONE OF THEM LANDED ROUNDS ON YOU THE MOMENT YOU POPPED UP? EBBY'S FIRE TEAMS NEED TO WORK ON THEIR AIM.
THEIR AIM WAS FINE.
EXPLAIN.
Captain Tagon asked me to work on adjusting projectile paths during his counterattack.
IT WAS GLORIOUS. I ALMOST HOPE WE HAVE TO REPEL BOARDERS SOMEDAY.

THOSE FIRE TEAMS MUST HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY DEMORALIZED, SEEING EVERY ROUND THEY FIRED SLIDE OFF TARGET
YOU OWE COMMANDER EBBIRNOTH AN EXPLANATION, AND AN APOLOGY
ALREADY DONE. I CAN'T HAVE MY PEOPLE THINKING THEIR AIM WAS BAD.
AT LEAST NOT FOR TOO LONG. IN THAT FIRST MOMENT, THOUGH?
OH, DAD YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN THEIR FACES.
YES. YES I SHOULD. IS THERE VIDEO?
HELMET CAM, AND A COLLECTION OF STILLS THAT BELONG IN THE BLACKMAIL SCRAPBOOK.

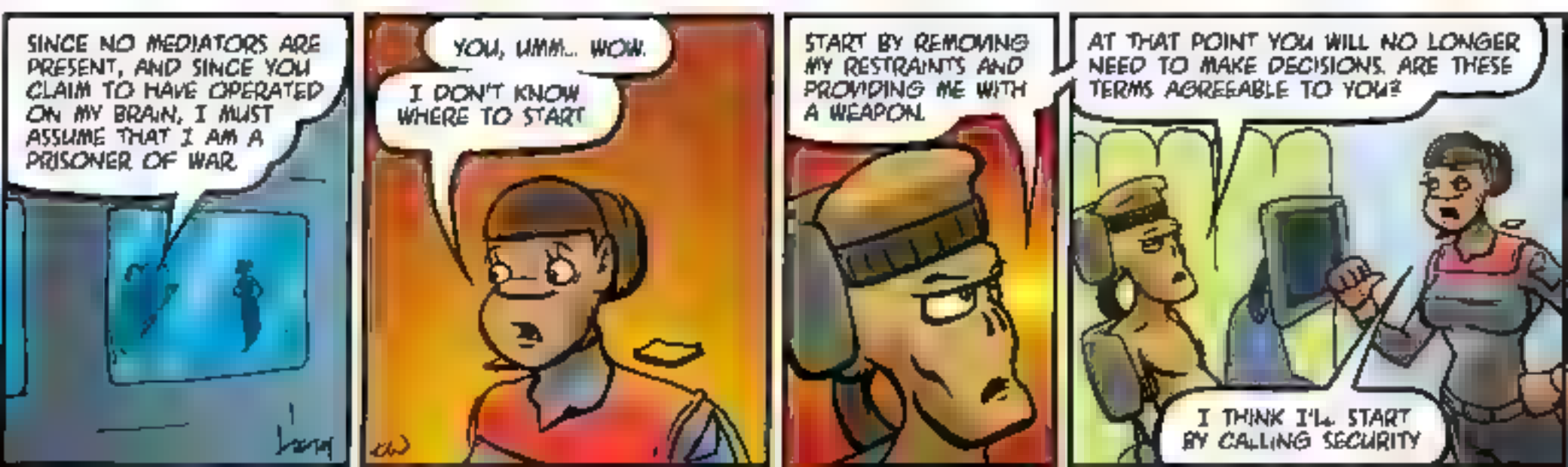
MEANWHILE. IN THE HOSPITAL POD ABOARD JUMPSTAR PRIME
HELLO, VOG. CAN YOU UNDERSTAND ME?
YEE...
YEEEHHSSS.
YESSS?
YES.
THIS LANGUAGE AM I SPEAKING. YOU HAVE PUT IT INTO MY HEAD SOMEHOW.
YOU USED TO SPEAK IT FLUENTLY, BUT YOUR BRAIN WAS BADLY DAMAGED

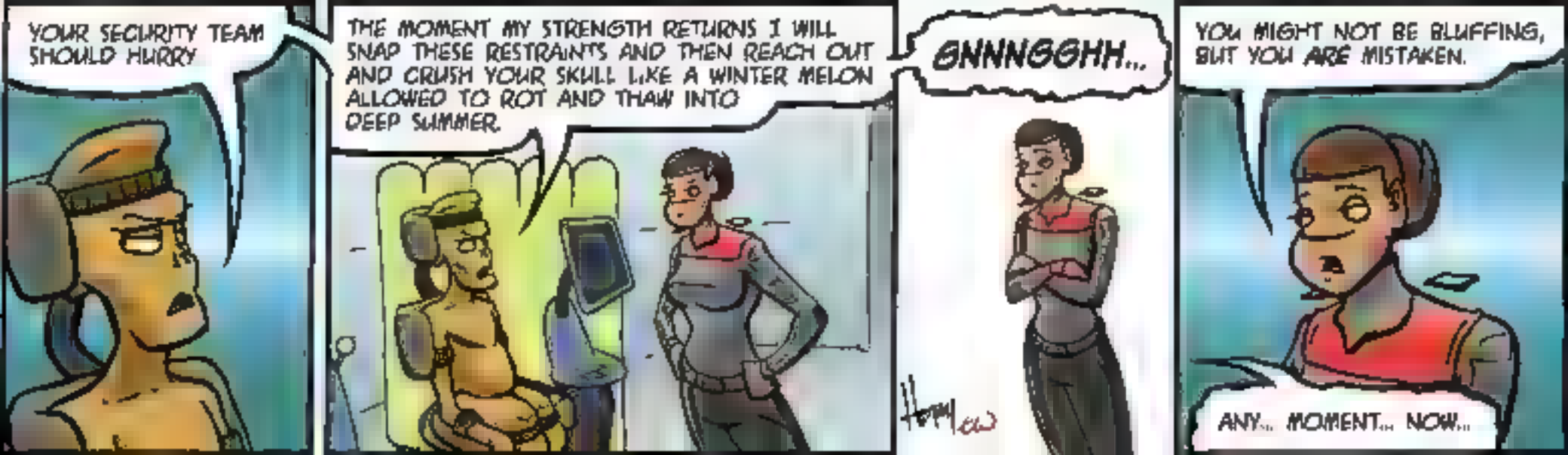
YOU CALLED ME "VOG" A **SINGLE SYLLABLE**. WAS THIS A DELIBERATE INSULT, OR ARE YOU AS IGNORANT AS YOU SEEM?

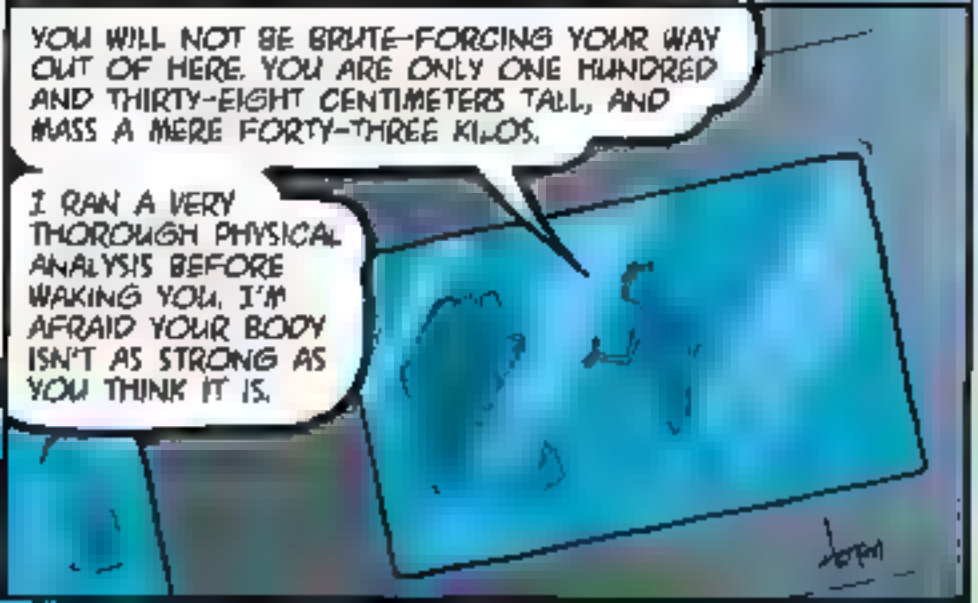
LET'S GO WITH "IGNORANT." I AM DOCTOR BUNNIGUS. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO ADDRESS YOU?

MY CASTE IS NEVER TO BE SPOKEN TO DIRECTLY, NOR EVEN **SEEN** BY OUTSIDERS.

YOU ARE NOT TO ADDRESS ME AT ALL, AND MAY ONLY SPEAK TO ME VIA A MEMBER OF THE MEDIATOR CLASS.

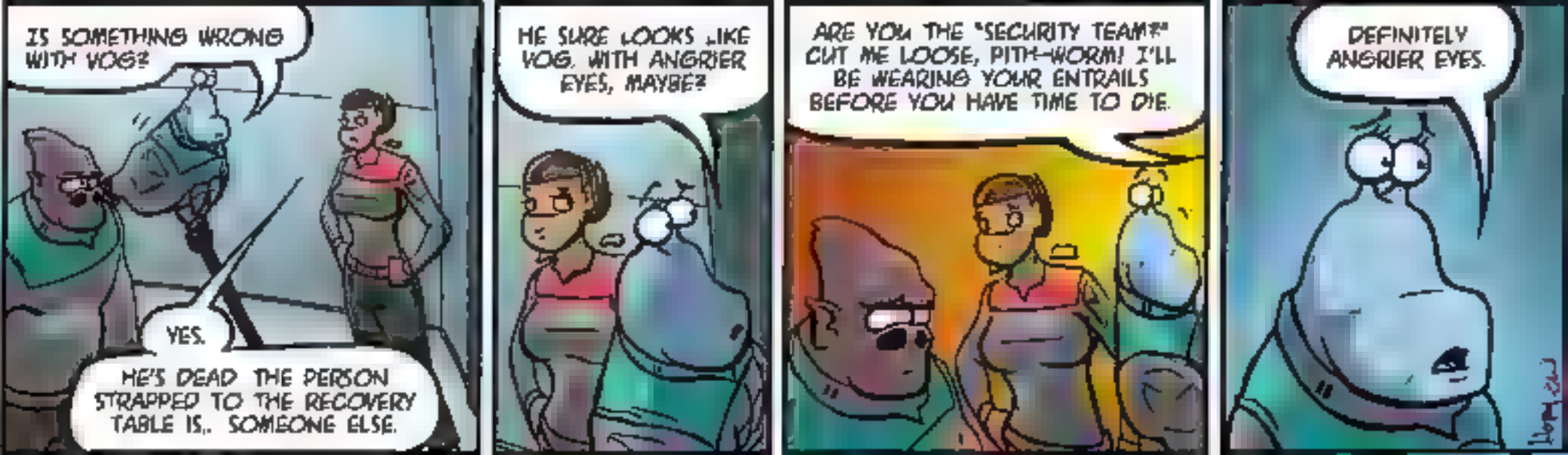

SINCE NO MEDIATORS ARE PRESENT, AND SINCE YOU CLAIM TO HAVE OPERATED ON MY BRAIN, I MUST ASSUME THAT I AM A PRISONER OF WAR.
YOU, UMM... WOW.
I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START.
START BY REMOVING MY RESTRAINTS AND PROVIDING ME WITH A WEAPON.
AT THAT POINT YOU WILL NO LONGER NEED TO MAKE DECISIONS. ARE THESE TERMS AGREEABLE TO YOU?
I THINK I'LL START BY CALLING SECURITY.


YOUR SECURITY TEAM SHOULD HURRY
THE MOMENT MY STRENGTH RETURNS I WILL SNAP THESE RESTRAINTS AND THEN REACH OUT AND CRUSH YOUR SKULL LIKE A WINTER MELON ALLOWED TO ROT AND THAW INTO DEEP SUMMER.
GNNNGGHH...
YOU MIGHT NOT BE BLUFFING, BUT YOU ARE MISTAKEN.
ANY... MOMENT... NOW...

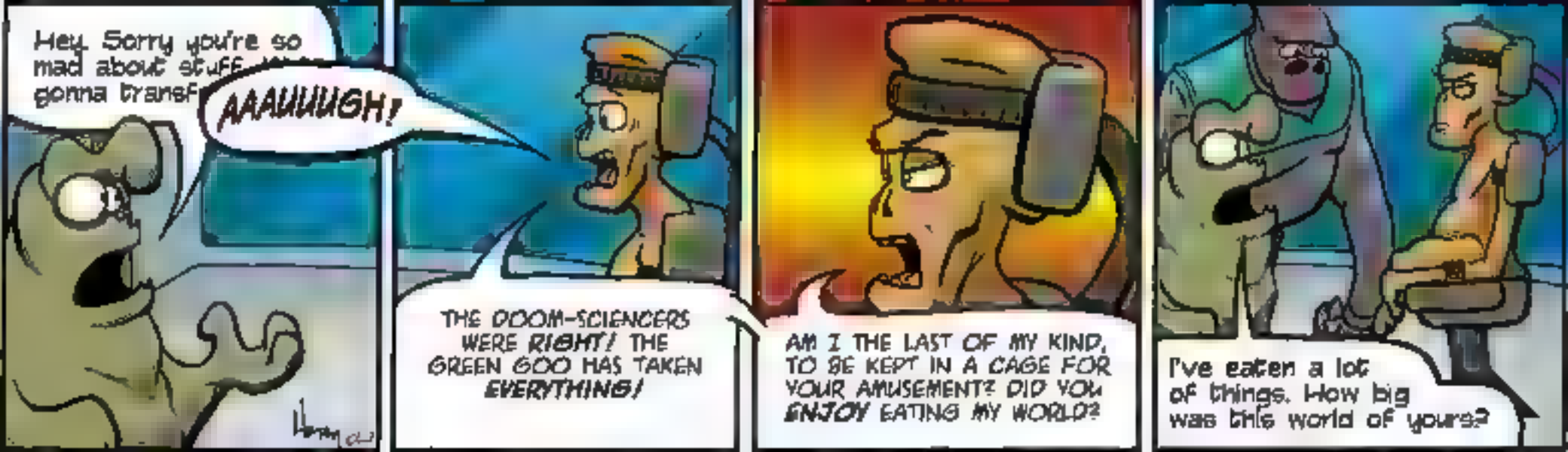

YOU WILL NOT BE BRUTE-FORCING YOUR WAY OUT OF HERE. YOU ARE ONLY ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-EIGHT CENTIMETERS TALL, AND MASS A MERE FORTY-THREE KILOS.
I RAN A VERY THOROUGH PHYSICAL ANALYSIS BEFORE WAKING YOU. I'M AFRAID YOUR BODY ISN'T AS STRONG AS YOU THINK IT IS.

I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE, OR WHAT YOU DID TO ME, BUT YOU HAVE MADE A VERY BIG MISTAKE.

YUP.


IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH VOG?
YES.
HE'S DEAD. THE PERSON STRAPPED TO THE RECOVERY TABLE IS... SOMEONE ELSE.
HE SURE LOOKS LIKE VOG, WITH ANGRIER EYES, MAYBE?
ARE YOU THE "SECURITY TEAM?" CUT ME LOOSE, PITH-WORM! I'LL BE WEARING YOUR ENTRAILS BEFORE YOU HAVE TIME TO DIE.
DEFINITELY ANGRIER EYES.

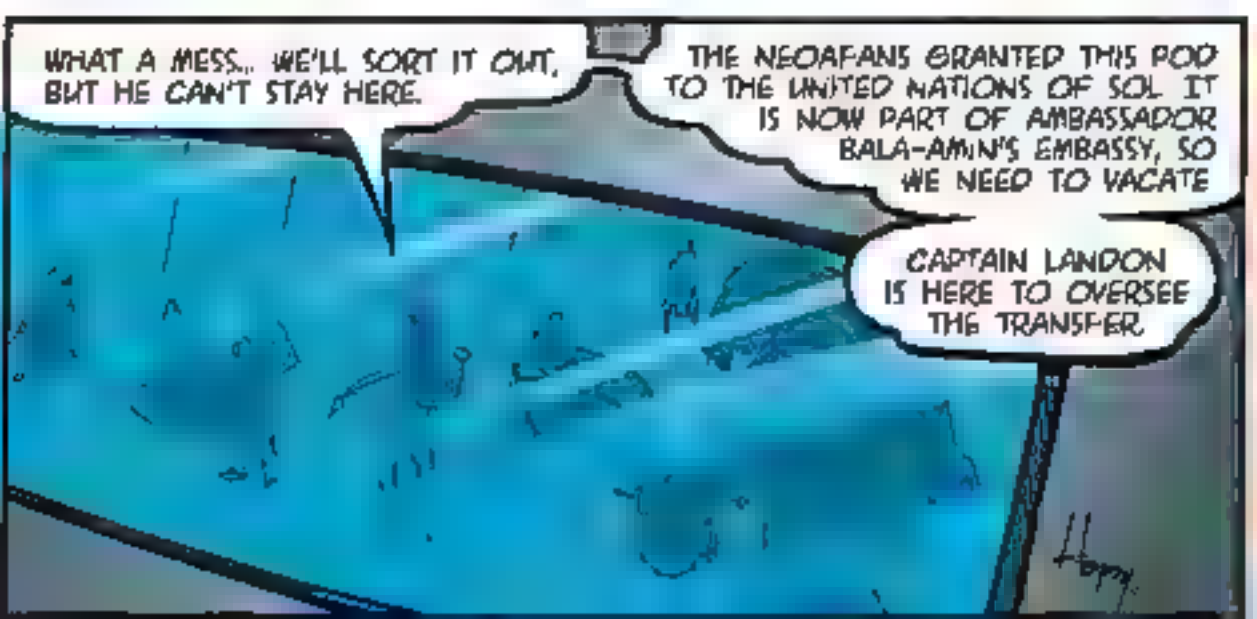
WHY DOES VOG HATE EVERYBODY? DID HE GO CRAZY IN THAT TANK?
NO HE'S ANCIENT, AND HE LOST TEN MILLION YEARS OF MEMORIES.
HE HATES EVERYBODY BECAUSE OF BRAIN DAMAGE?
NO, HE HATES EVERYBODY BECAUSE TEN MILLION YEARS AGO HE HATED EVERYBODY.
So it's really old brain damage.

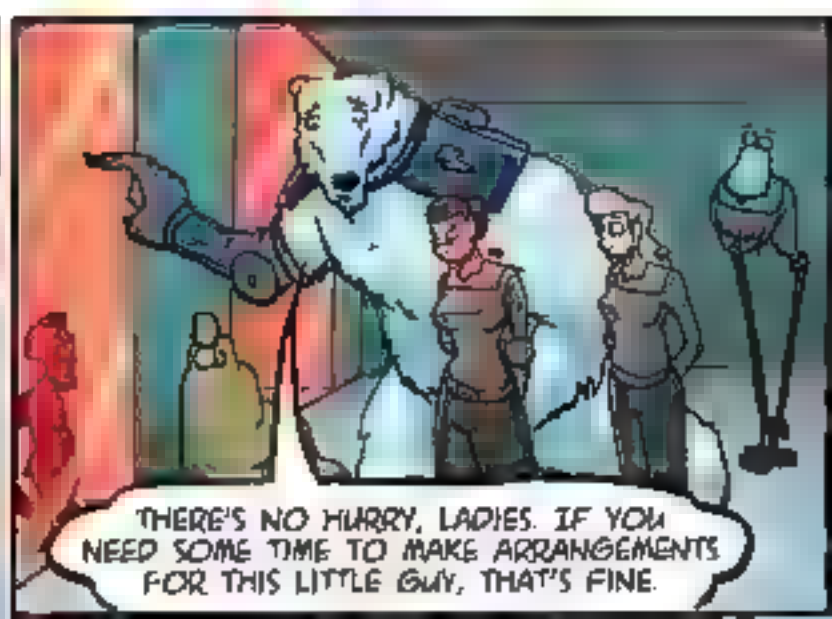

Hey. Sorry you're so mad about stuff
gonna transf
AAAUUUGH!
THE DOOM-SCIENCERS WERE RIGHT! THE GREEN GOO HAS TAKEN EVERYTHING!
AM I THE LAST OF MY KIND, TO BE KEPT IN A CAGE FOR YOUR AMUSEMENT? DID YOU ENJOY EATING MY WORLD?
I've eaten a lot of things. How big was this world of yours?

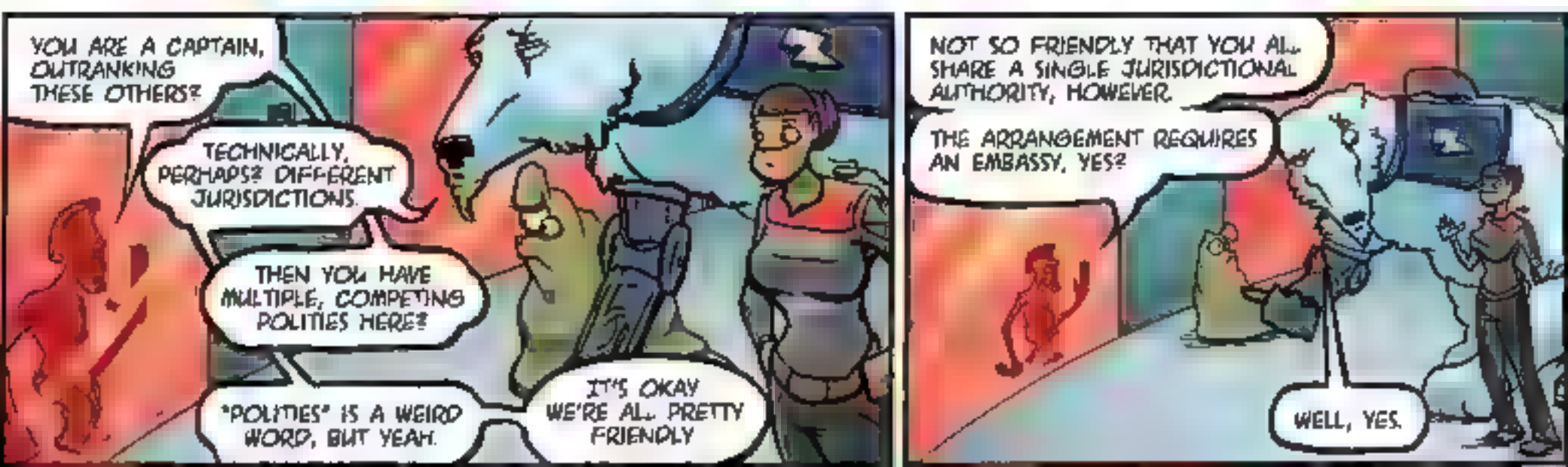
Guess what, Doc? We found someone Not-Vog hates more than he hates you.
IS IT YOU?
You were listening?
LUCKY GUESS.
I'M KIDDING! I WAS TOTALLY LISTENING! CROSS MY HEART, EAR-TO-THE-WALL... YOU BETCHA.

JUMPSTAR PRIME GARRISON POD McENROWE BRIG FOUR.
DOCTOR, WHAT'S YOUR TEAM DOING IN HERE? WHY DID YOU LIGHT UP THIS POD?
I'M SORRY, COMMANDER. WE NEEDED A BRIG FOR.. FOR HIM.

IS THAT VOG?
NOT VOG.
HE SELF-IDENTIFIES AS AN ENEMY COMBATANT, AND WANTS TO KILL US ALL.

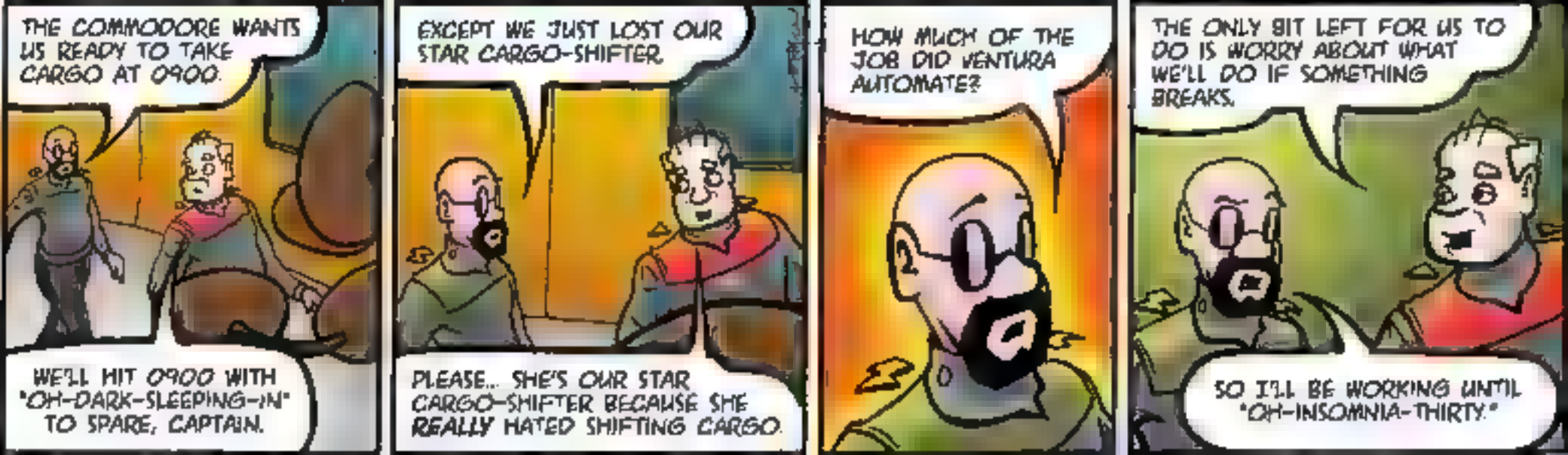

WHAT A MESS... WE'LL SORT IT OUT, BUT HE CAN'T STAY HERE.
THE NEOAFANS GRANTED THIS POD TO THE UNITED NATIONS OF SOL. IT IS NOW PART OF AMBASSADOR BALA-AMIN'S EMBASSY, SO WE NEED TO VACATE
CAPTAIN LANDON IS HERE TO OVERSEE THE TRANSFER.


THERE'S NO HURRY, LADIES. IF YOU NEED SOME TIME TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THIS LITTLE GUY, THAT'S FINE.

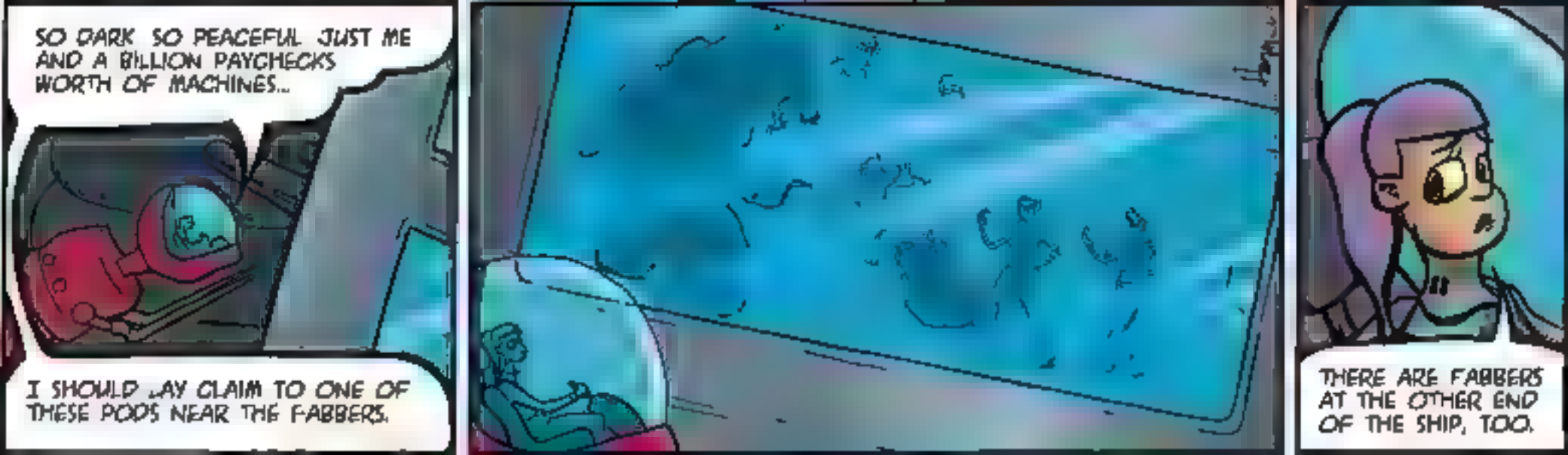

YOU ARE A CAPTAIN, OUTRANKING THESE OTHERS?
TECHNICALLY, PERHAPS? DIFFERENT JURISDICTIONS.
THEN YOU HAVE MULTIPLE, COMPETING POLITIES HERE?
"POLITIES" IS A WEIRD WORD, BUT YEAH.
IT'S OKAY WE'RE ALL PRETTY FRIENDLY
NOT SO FRIENDLY THAT YOU ALL SHARE A SINGLE JURISDICTIONAL AUTHORITY, HOWEVER.
THE ARRANGEMENT REQUIRES AN EMBASSY, YES?
WELL, YES.

DOCTOR BUNNIGUS, YOU VIOLATED MY BRAIN WITH THIS LANGUAGE, BUT I MUST THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME THE EXACT WORDS I NOW NEED.
CAPTAIN LANDON, I REQUEST ASYLUM.
Why are you looking at me? Nobody said there were words he wasn't supposed to have.

BACK ABOARD CINDERCONE
VENTURA, YOU'RE DONE SHIFTING CARGO. I AM TRANSFERRING YOU TO THE JUMPSTARTER.
THE FIRST FABBER PROJECT IS THE CRYPT SPIDERS, AND IT'S ALL YOURS.
THANK YOU, SIR.
AND THANK YOU FOR THE CHANCE TO DO SOME WORK OUT FROM UNDER YOUR SHADOW.
WE'RE IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES. MY WORK DOESN'T OVERSHADOW YOURS.
SAYS THE MAN WHO NAMED MY CARGO LOADER "THE LONGSHOREMAN OF THE APOCALYPSE."


THE COMMODORE WANTS US READY TO TAKE CARGO AT 0900.
WE'LL HIT 0900 WITH "OH-DARK-SLEEPING-IN" TO SPARE, CAPTAIN.
EXCEPT WE JUST LOST OUR STAR CARGO-SHIFTER.
PLEASE... SHE'S OUR STAR CARGO-SHIFTER BECAUSE SHE REALLY HATED SHIFTING CARGO.
HOW MUCH OF THE JOB DID VENTURA AUTOMATE?
THE ONLY BIT LEFT FOR US TO DO IS WORRY ABOUT WHAT WE'LL DO IF SOMETHING BREAKS.
SO I'LL BE WORKING UNTIL "OH-INSOMNIA-THIRTY."

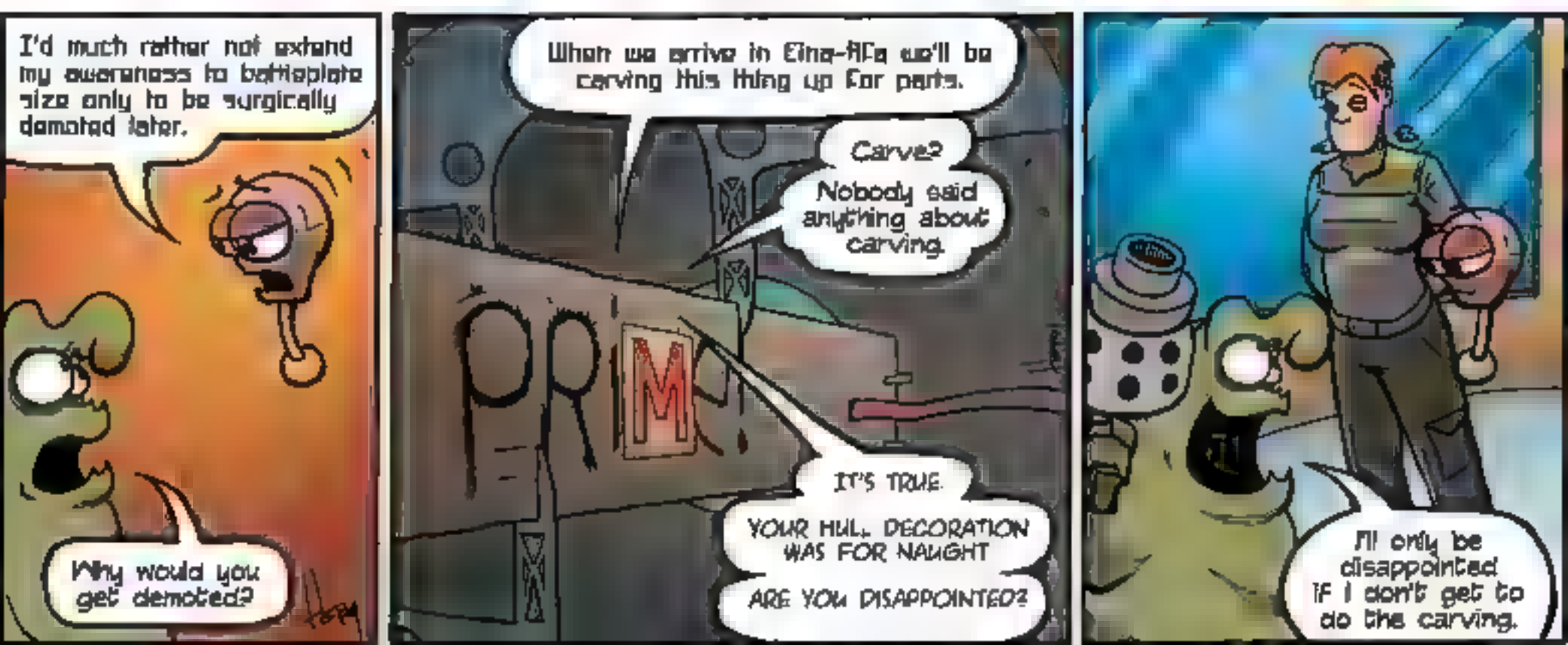
THE ROBOTICIST ARRIVES AT JUMPSTAR PRIME
THIS IS WHY LETTERING SHOULD BE DONE BY MACHINES.


SO DARK SO PEACEFUL JUST ME AND A BILLION PAYCHECKS WORTH OF MACHINES...
I SHOULD LAY CLAIM TO ONE OF THESE PODS NEAR THE FABBERS.
THERE ARE FABBERS AT THE OTHER END OF THE SHIP, TOO.

CAPTAIN ON DECK!
CAPTAIN, WE CAN'T TURN VOG OVER TO
CAN, DID, AND DONE
THIS POD AND THAT PATIENT DO NOT BELONG TO US ANYMORE, DOCTOR. TAKE YOUR SECURITY DETAIL WITH YOU ON YOUR WAY OUT
THIS IS A VERY SAD STORY THAT DOES NOT NEED TO BE RETOLD AS AN ANGRY POLITICAL INCIDENT
I'M BACK, COMMANDER. YOU'RE RELIEVED.
VERY THANK YOU SIR.

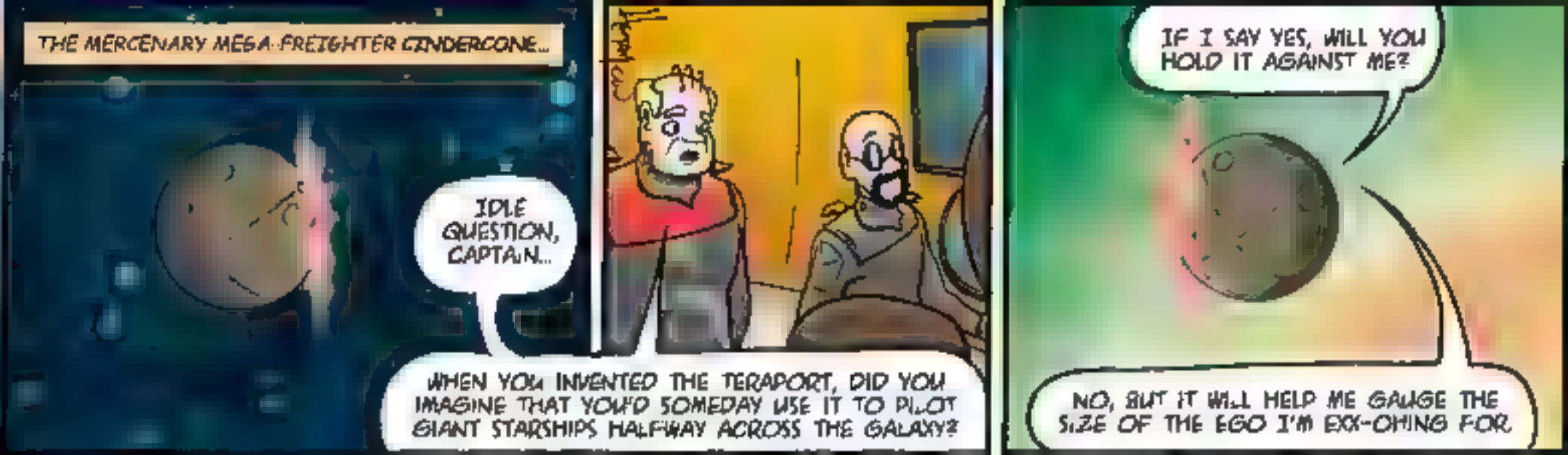
CAPTAIN LANDON, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU [illegible].
IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU ALIVE, CAPTAIN MURTAUGH.
THE WAY I HEAR IT, YOU PAID FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY WITH YOUR RIGHT ARM.
I SHOULD HAVE BEEN...
FASTER?
YOUR REFLEXES ARE JUST FINE.

0900 HOURS. SOL SYSTEM UNIVERSAL STATION TIME
So now our shiny new battleplate is just cargo.
BY SOME DEFINITIONS, THIS TRIP MAKES THE J.P. A BOAT
How come we're not flying there ourselves?
WE DON'T HAVE AN A.I.
Eeeiaah... Ennesby is right behind you.
It's okay, Sergeant I didn't want the job.

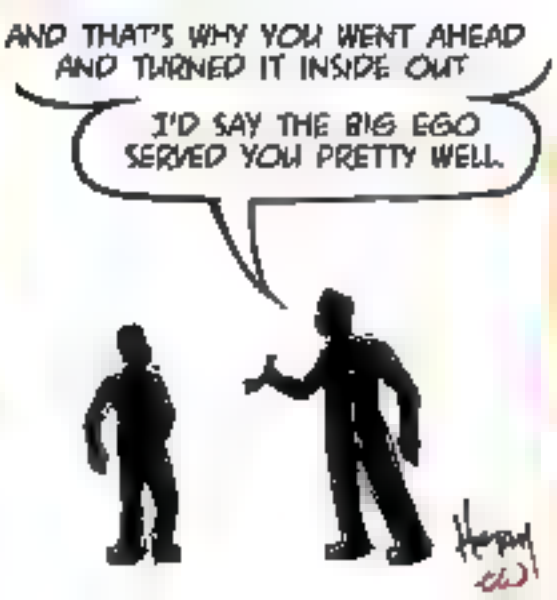

I'd much rather not extend my awareness to battleplate size only to be surgically demoted later.
Why would you get demoted?
When we arrive in Eina-Ifa we'll be carving this thing up for parts.
Carve?
Nobody said anything about carving.
PRIM
IT'S TRUE.
YOUR HULL DECORATION WAS FOR NAUGHT
ARE YOU DISAPPOINTED?
I'll only be disappointed if I don't get to do the carving.

JUMPSTAR PRIME U.N.S. EMBASSY POD TWO
WE INHERITED A CURIOUS PROBLEM. SO I ASKED CAPTAIN SORLIE TO HIRE AN EXPERT
WHAT BETTER EXPERT THAN THE ONE WHO DECANTED OUR PROBLEM IN THE FIRST PLACE?
OKAY BUT THE LAST TIME I PRACTICED MEDICINE IN AN EMBASSY, THE EMBASSY EXPLODED.
NOTED SORLIE, AMEND HER CONTRACT WITH A "DO NOT BLOW UP MY EMBASSY" CLAUSE.

AMBASSADOR, PLEASE. JUST LET ME TAKE VOG BACK TO MY LAB. THIS PROBLEM IS MY FAULT I SHOULD OWN IT
BUT YOU DO NOT OWN IT THIS PROBLEM IS THE FAULT OF THE GOVERNMENT I REPRESENT
YOU'RE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MESS THEY MADE OF VOG'S BRAIN, MA'AM. THAT'S ON ME
IRRELEVANT, SINCE THE OVERARCHING MESS WAS CREATED BY THE U.N.S.
AND IN THIS EMBASSY I AM THE U.N.S.
THAT INTERPRETATION OF YOUR JOB MIGHT NOT BE HEALTHY
PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF.

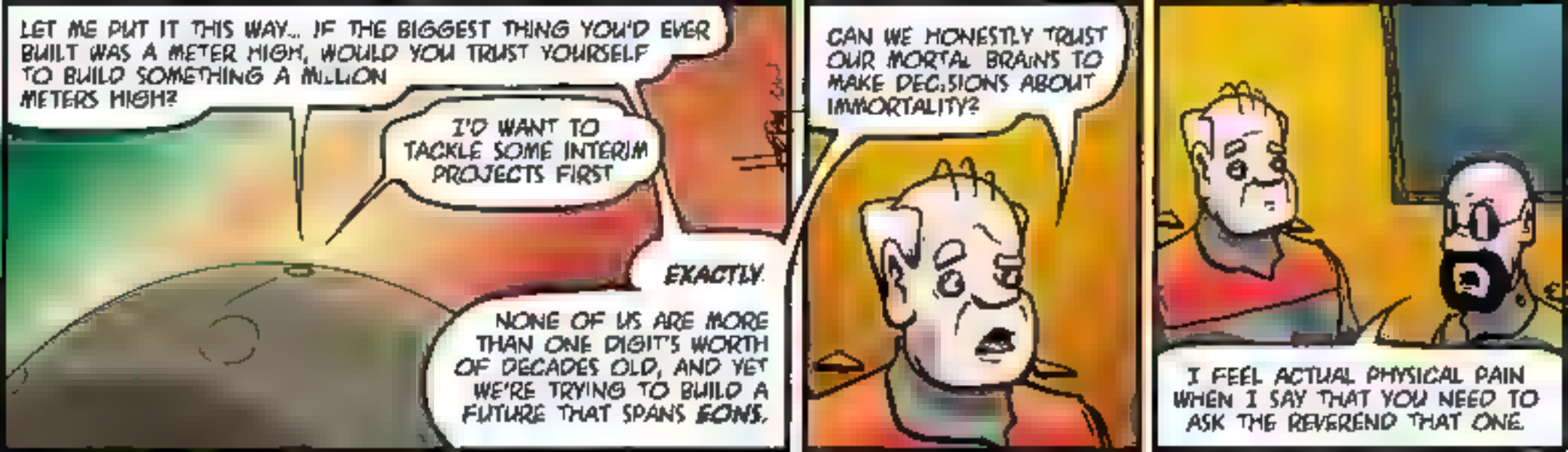

THE MERCENARY MEGA-FREIGHTER CINDERCONE...
IDLE QUESTION, CAPTAIN...
WHEN YOU INVENTED THE TERAPORT, DID YOU IMAGINE THAT YOU'D SOMEDAY USE IT TO PILOT GIANT STARSHIPS HALFWAY ACROSS THE GALAXY?
IF I SAY YES, WILL YOU HOLD IT AGAINST ME?
NO, BUT IT WILL HELP ME GAUGE THE SIZE OF THE EGO I'M EXX-OHING FOR

I HAD A MUCH BIGGER EGO BACK IN '95, THURL.
I WAS TOO SELF-IMPORTANT TO LISTEN TO PROFESSORS, OR ACCEPT FINANCIAL ADVICE, OR EVEN ADMIT TO MYSELF HOW LITTLE I KNEW ABOUT THE INDUSTRY I WAS ABOUT TO TURN INSIDE OUT.


AND THAT'S WHY YOU WENT AHEAD AND TURNED IT INSIDE OUT
I'D SAY THE BIG EGO SERVED YOU PRETTY WELL.

I STARTED A WAR, GOT BURIED ALIVE, AND ONE OF MY PROJECTS TWISTED YOUR HEAD CLEAN OFF.
THIS NEW NECK HAS A MUCH BETTER RANGE OF MOTION, SIR.

WHAT BROUGHT THIS ON, THURL? WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?
SCOPE AND SCALE, SIR.
GIMME THE VERSION THAT HAS MORE THAN FOUR WORDS IN IT?
OKAY. WHEN I WAS TWENTY MY DREAMS DIDN'T REACH MUCH FURTHER THAN AGE 45.
NOW I'M THIRTY-HMM YEARS PAST THAT POINT, AND WE'RE TRYING TO DREAM ABOUT THE NEXT TEN THOUSAND YEARS AS IF WE'LL ACTUALLY BE THERE FOR ALL OF THEM.
TEN THOUSAND? THURL, YOU'RE NOT TAKING THE LONG VIEW.
SCOPE AND SCALE, SIR.


LET ME PUT IT THIS WAY... IF THE BIGGEST THING YOU'D EVER BUILT WAS A METER HIGH, WOULD YOU TRUST YOURSELF TO BUILD SOMETHING A MILLION METERS HIGH?
I'D WANT TO TACKLE SOME INTERIM PROJECTS FIRST
EXACTLY.
NONE OF US ARE MORE THAN ONE DIGIT'S WORTH OF DECADES OLD, AND YET WE'RE TRYING TO BUILD A FUTURE THAT SPANS EONS.
CAN WE HONESTLY TRUST OUR MORTAL BRAINS TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT IMMORTALITY?
I FEEL ACTUAL PHYSICAL PAIN WHEN I SAY THAT YOU NEED TO ASK THE REVEREND THAT ONE.

BROKEN WIND AND CINDERCONE APPROACH EINA-AFA
THE NEOAFAN FREEHOLD SYSTEM'S "CAN FULL OF SKY"

Chinook, this is Iafa. We're back, and Cindy brought you a present

Just one? I've got an entire world to run here.

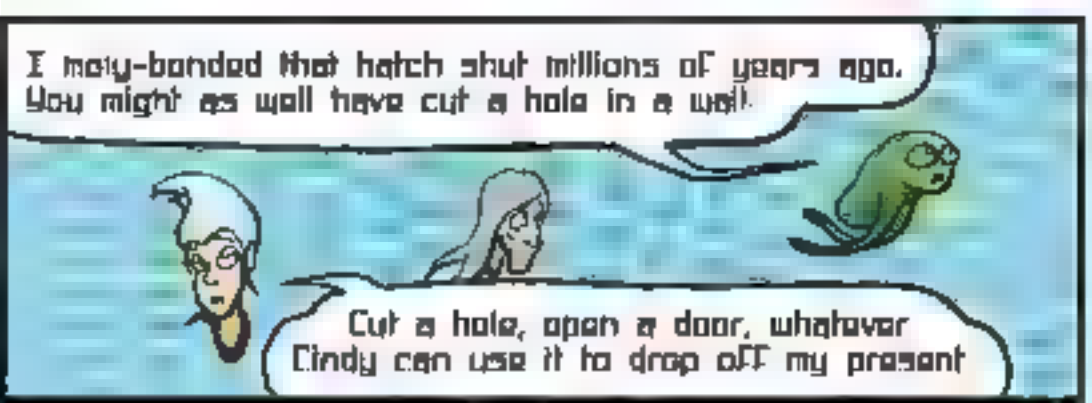
I need all the presents.

You only get one, but it's loaded.

It's a fifth generation Tricorn-Class battleplate with three 1100-meter annies and six shipwright-class fabber bays.

Three annie plants? Cindy, we asked for five.

Captain Murtough's expedition was underpaid. Sorry, love. We're settling for three.
Cindy, IaFa... I need more power than that. I had to turn out the lights for twenty-two minutes yesterday just to open a door.
What door?
The axial hatch two thousand klicks west of the hurricane track.


I molly-bonded that hatch shut millions of years ago. You might as well have cut a hole in a wall.
Cut a hole, open a door, whatever Cindy can use it to drop off my present

You want me to haul Jumpster Prime down in one piece? The original plan was to take her apart upstairs

"Jumpstar Prime?"

Who gave her that name?

It's only temporary. We're taking her apart, remember?

Hmph. I still need to speak with the person responsible.

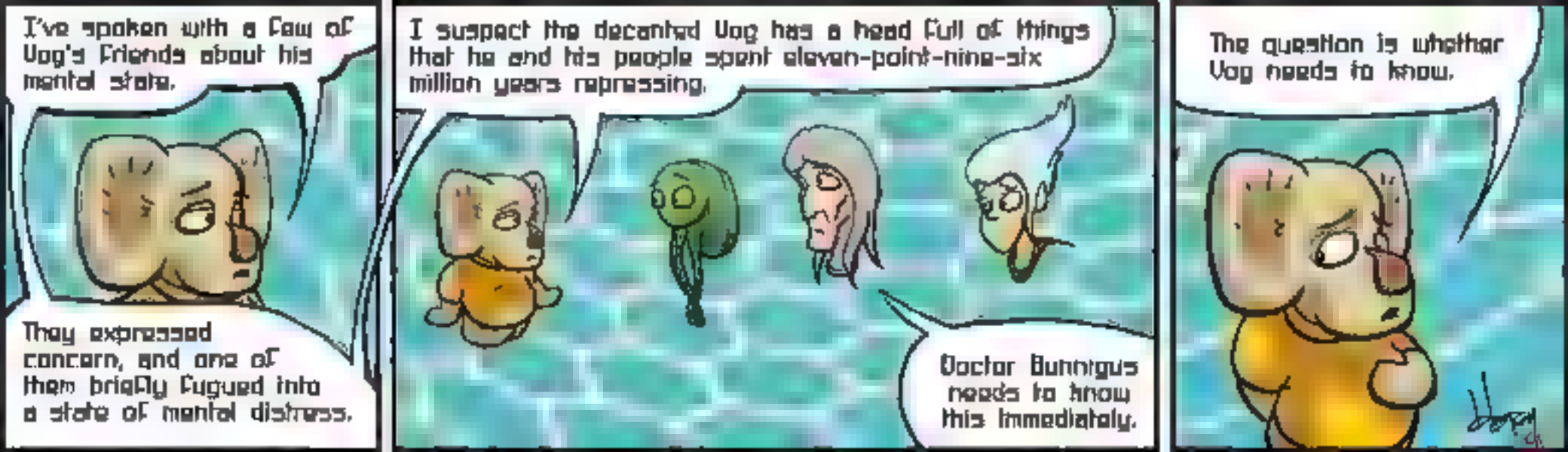
MILLISECONDS LATER

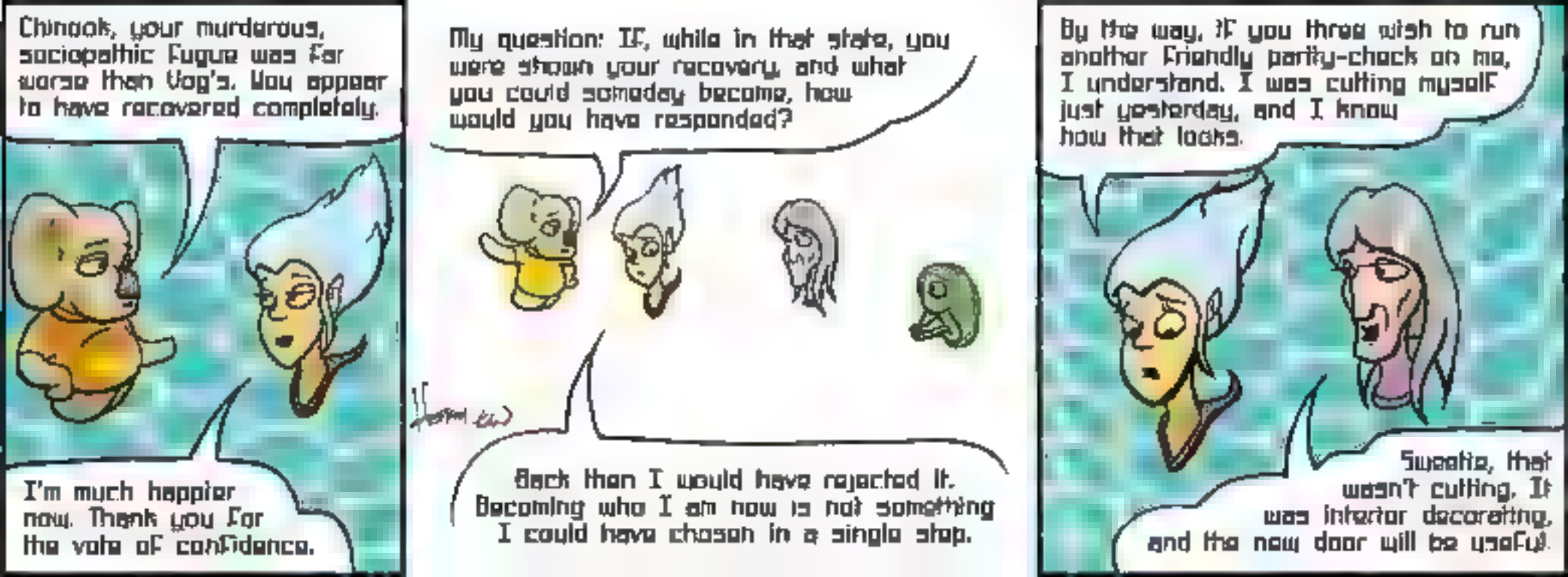
"Jumpstar Prime!"

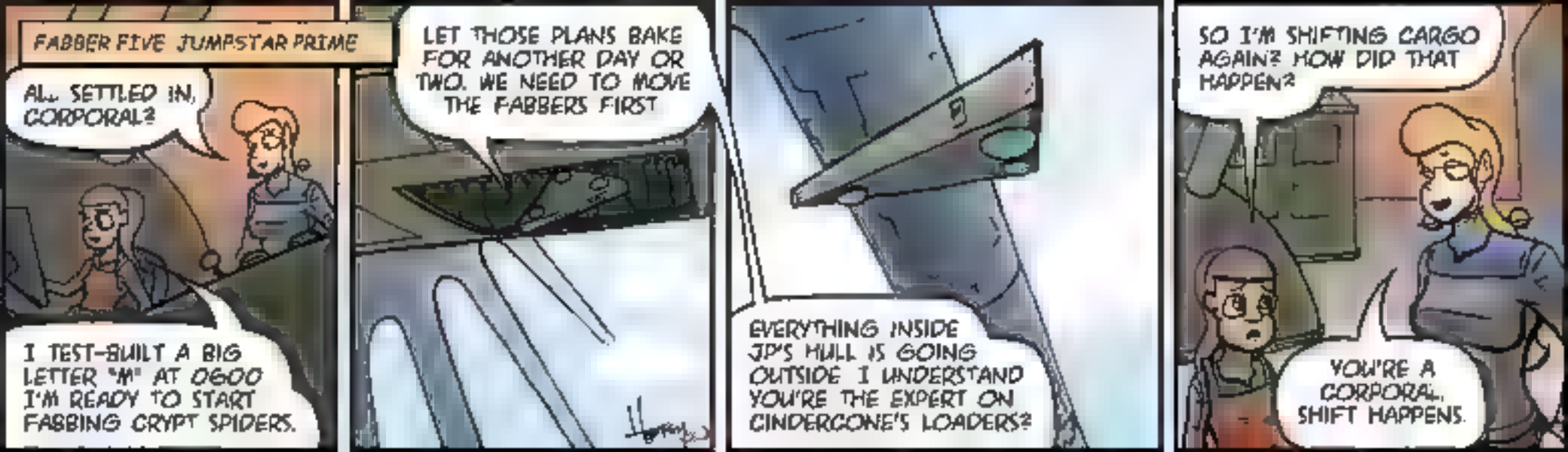
Sergeant, it is PERFECT. I wish I had skin! I'd get it as a tattoo!

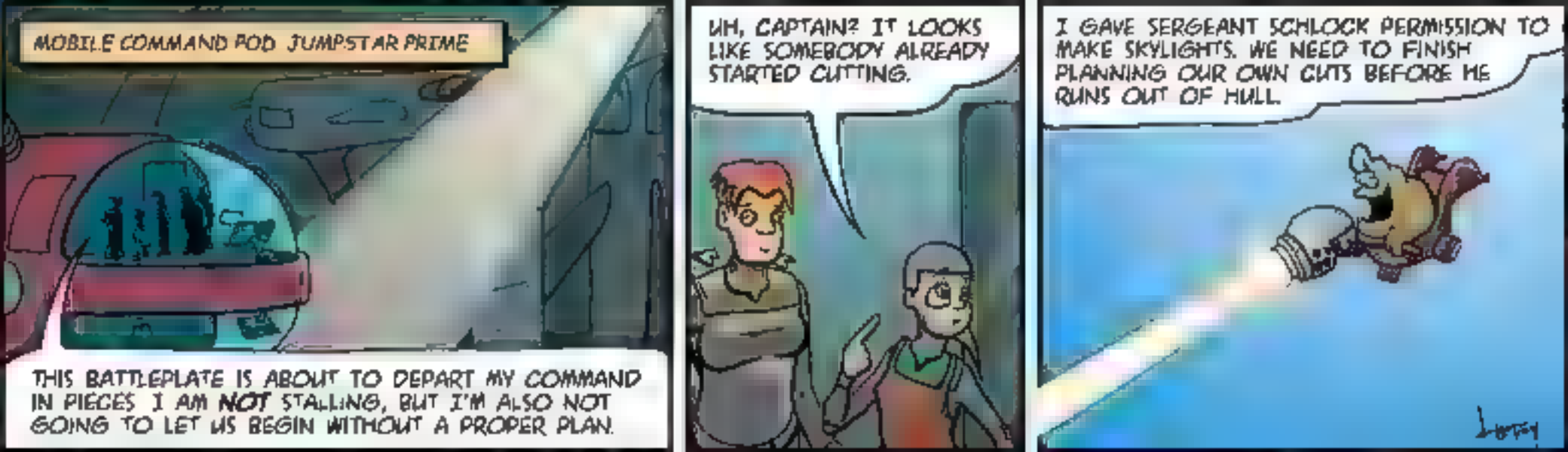
Already taken care of, but I can do a bigger one if you'd like.

How are my friends doing?
Kind of squabbly.
They still act as if they are resource-constrained.
They do not seem to realize that their reach no longer exceeds their grasp.
They'll figure it out, but we might need to give 'em a thousand years.
That's among the things we will be giving them, yes.

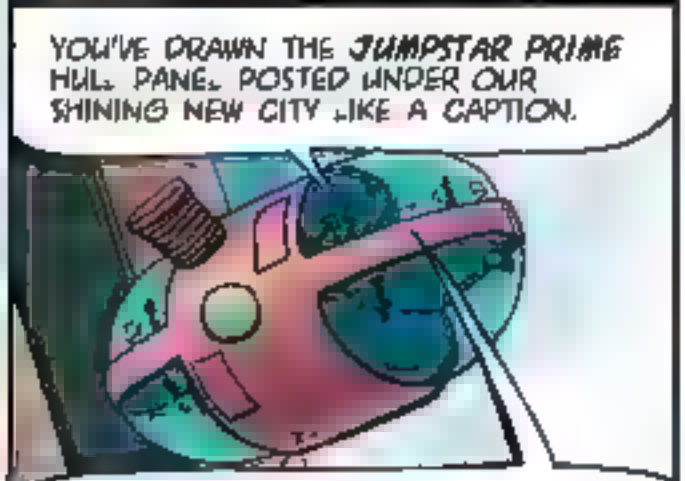

I've spoken with a few of Vog's friends about his mental state.
They expressed concern, and one of them briefly fugued into a state of mental distress.
I suspect the decanted Vog has a head full of things that he and his people spent eleven-point-nine-six million years repressing.
Doctor Bunnigus needs to know this immediately.
The question is whether Vog needs to know.


Chinook, your murderous, sociopathic fugue was far worse than Vog's. You appear to have recovered completely.
I'm much happier now. Thank you for the vote of confidence.
My question: If, while in that state, you were shown your recovery, and what you could someday become, how would you have responded?
Back then I would have rejected it. Becoming who I am now is not something I could have chosen in a single step.
By the way, if you three wish to run another friendly party-check on me, I understand. I was cutting myself just yesterday, and I know how that looks.
Sweetie, that wasn't cutting. It was interior decorating, and the new door will be useful.


FABBER FIVE JUMPSTAR PRIME
ALL SETTLED IN, CORPORAL?
I TEST-BUILT A BIG LETTER "M" AT 0600 I'M READY TO START FABBING CRYPT SPIDERS.
LET THOSE PLANS BAKE FOR ANOTHER DAY OR TWO. WE NEED TO MOVE THE FABBERS FIRST
EVERYTHING INSIDE JP'S HULL IS GOING OUTSIDE I UNDERSTAND YOU'RE THE EXPERT ON CINDERCONE'S LOADERS?
SO I'M SHIFTING CARGO AGAIN? HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?
YOU'RE A CORPORAL. SHIFT HAPPENS.


MOBILE COMMAND POD JUMPSTAR PRIME
THIS BATTLEPLATE IS ABOUT TO DEPART MY COMMAND IN PIECES. I AM NOT STALLING, BUT I'M ALSO NOT GOING TO LET US BEGIN WITHOUT A PROPER PLAN.
UH, CAPTAIN? IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY ALREADY STARTED CUTTING.
I GAVE SERGEANT SCHLOCK PERMISSION TO MAKE SKYLIGHTS. WE NEED TO FINISH PLANNING OUR OWN CUTS BEFORE HE RUNS OUT OF HULL.

I've got some blueprints and a project plan here, if you'd like to take a look.
This will make efficient use of Jumpstar Prime's materials, without requiring any new fabrication.


YOU'VE DRAWN THE JUMPSTAR PRIME HULL PANEL POSTED UNDER OUR SHINING NEW CITY LIKE A CAPTION.
Chinook insisted on that, since it's the name of the city we're building.

WHO SAID THAT'S THE NAME OF THE CITY?
Chinook did.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU START WRITING ON HULLS AT OH-AWESOME-THIRTY

EINA-AFA EAST, U.N.S EMBASSY POD TWO

THIS PROJECT PLAN HAS THE WORD "BISECT" IN IT. I DON'T LIKE THAT WORD.

THE ARMORED LOZENGE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE IN LOCAL GRAVITY. HALF THE SPACES WILL BE UPSIDE DOWN.

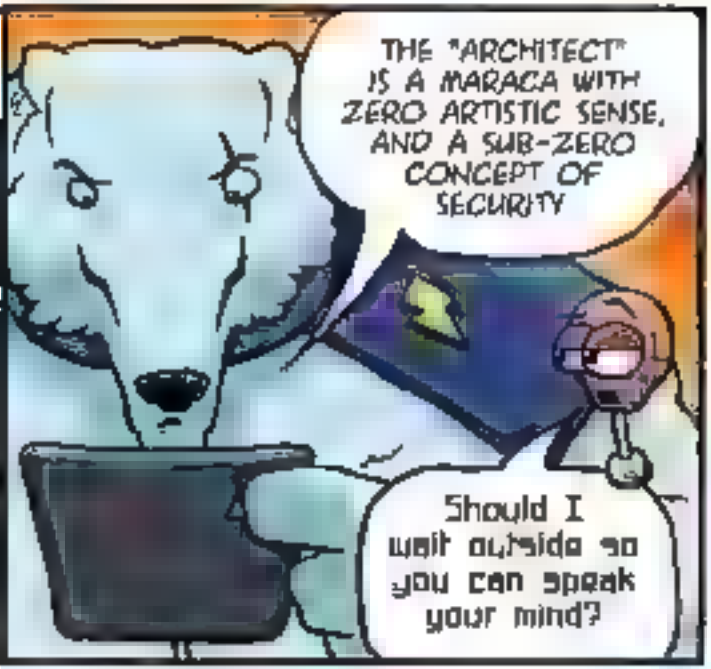
UPSIDE-DOWN ONLY MATTERS IF YOU'RE GAZING AT THE SCENERY.

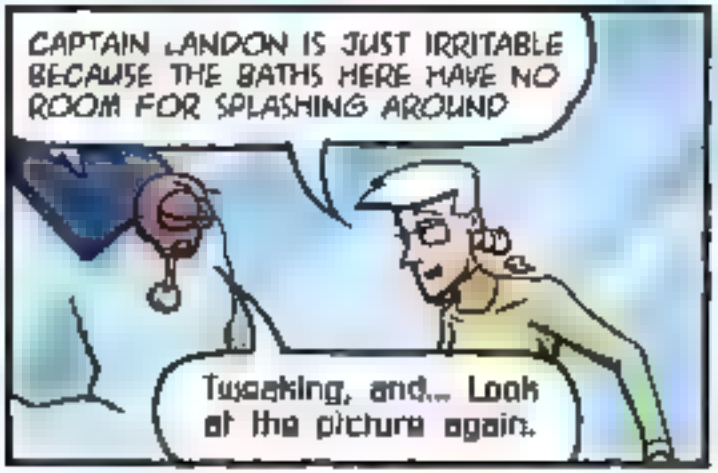
TURN AROUND AND LOOK OUT THE WINDOW. THE SCENERY HERE *DESERVES* GAZING.

SEE THAT? IT'S HUMBLING AND AWE-INSPIRING, AND IT'S WHY THE ARCHITECT WANTS TO REPURPOSE MOST OF THE POD'S HULL AS RETRACTABLE STORM-SHUTTERS.

RE-*WHAT* THE HULL?

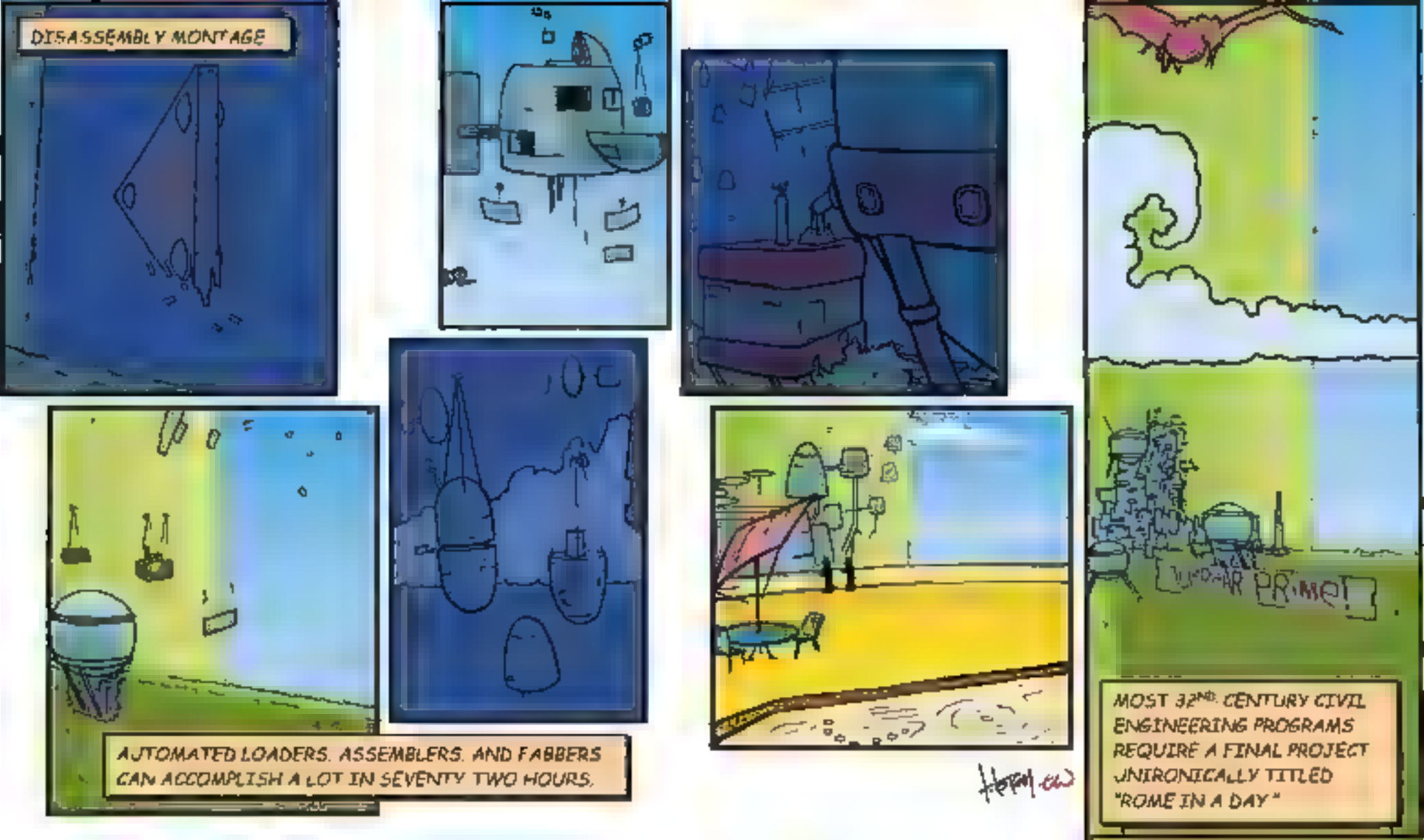
LOOK AT THE PICTURE.


THE "ARCHITECT" IS A MARACA WITH ZERO ARTISTIC SENSE, AND A SUB-ZERO CONCEPT OF SECURITY
Should I wait outside so you can speak your mind?


CAPTAIN LANDON IS JUST IRRITABLE BECAUSE THE BATHS HERE HAVE NO ROOM FOR SPLASHING AROUND
Tweaking, and... Look at the picture again.

HMPH.

THREE DAYS LATER
HMPH.
His mouth is grouchy, but the whole rest of his body is happier than I've ever felt it.


DISASSEMBLY MONTAGE
AUTOMATED LOADERS, ASSEMBLERS, AND FABBERS CAN ACCOMPLISH A LOT IN SEVENTY TWO HOURS.
MOST 32ND CENTURY CIVIL ENGINEERING PROGRAMS REQUIRE A FINAL PROJECT UNIRONICALLY TITLED "ROME IN A DAY"

UNS EMBASSY POD TWO IN THE CITY OF JUMPSTAR PRIME.

I LIKE THE LAYOUT. DOES YOUR NEW EMBASSY QUALIFY AS TERRAN SOIL, OR MARTIAN SOIL, OR WHAT?

ALL THE SOIL AND THEN SOME

THE SANDS IN OUR ZEN GARDEN ARE FROM EARTH, MARS, LUNA, AND VENUS.

THE PEBBLES ARE A POLISHED SAMPLE SET FROM EVERY OTHER INHABITED ROCK IN SOL SYSTEM.

THE GARDEN'S TRIM IS A MOSAIC OF POLYMER CHIPS ORIGINATING, ONE CHIP EACH, FROM SOL'S MANY HABITATS.

THAT'S A LOT OF WORK FOR A LITTLE SYMBOLISM.

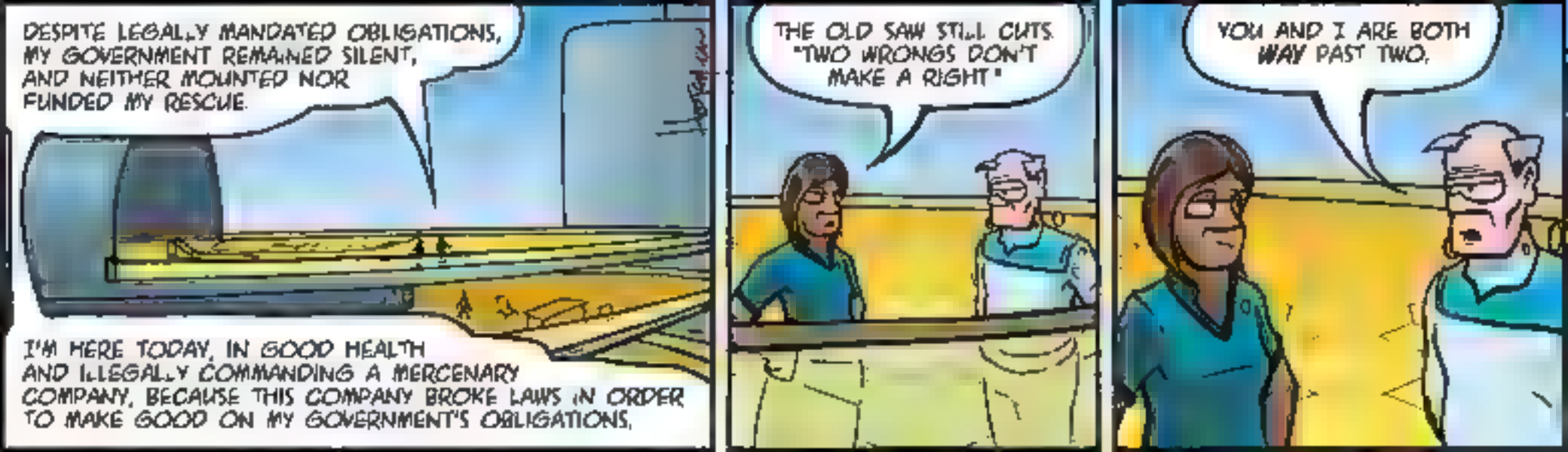
IT ALL ARRIVED IN THE SAME CRATE.

THERE'S AN ENTIRE INDUSTRY BUILT AROUND THESE EMBASSY FRANCHISE KITS.

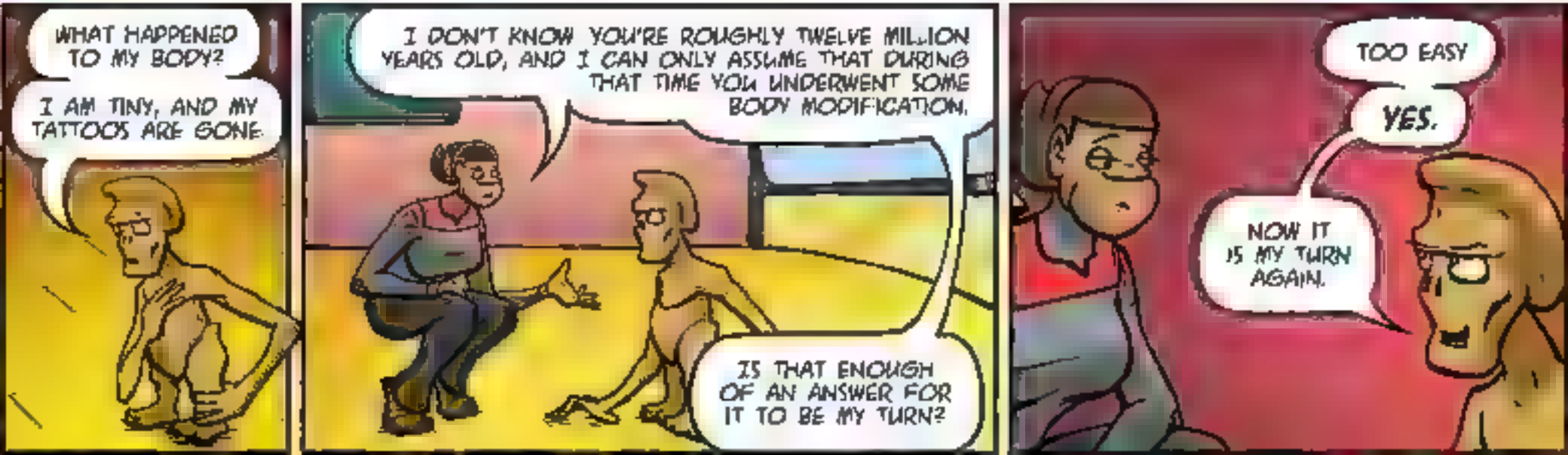
YOU'RE TAKING A BIG CHANCE SETTING FOOT IN OFFICIAL U.N.S. TERRITORY.
IF WE'RE GOING TO DISCUSS MY "RETIREMENT" WE MIGHT AS WELL CLEAR ALL THE AIR AT ONCE.
HOW DOES THE AIR GET CLEARED IF CAPTAIN LANDON ARRESTS YOU?
CAPTAIN LANDON IS WAY TOO MELLOW TO ARREST ANYBODY RIGHT NOW.
THE POLAR POOL WAS YOUR IDEA?
I'M LEARNING TO PLAY THE LONG GAME.

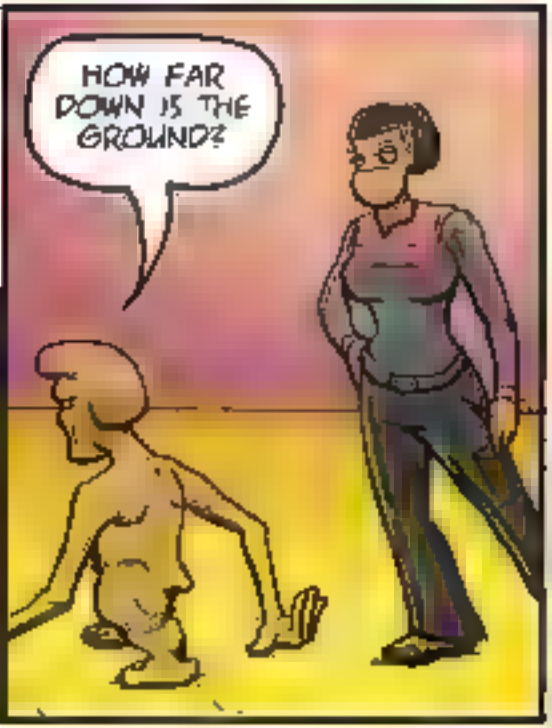
YOU'RE FAMILIAR WITH CELESCHUL'S "SPECIAL ASSETS" LAW, I ASSUME?
I'D BETTER BE. I WROTE THE STUPID THING.
THEN YOU KNEW YOU WERE BREAKING IT WHEN YOU LEFT RETIREMENT AND TOOK COMMAND OF A COMPANY OF MERCENARIES IN SERVICE TO A FOREIGN POWER.
I WROTE IT. I CAN RE-WRITE IT
THAT'S NOT ACTUALLY HOW LAW WORKS.
I KNOW MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE WHO WOULD DISAGREE WITH YOU UNDER OATH.
OKAY, THAT'S NOT HOW LAW WORKS FOR REGULAR PEOPLE.

I RETIRED WITH A HEAD FULL OF SECRETS, SO THE PRIVATE SECTOR WAS, BY LAW, CLOSED TO ME.
I SERVED TO MAKE MY WORLD SAFER. THIS WAS AN EASY PRICE TO PAY
THEN CRIMINALS WITH AN OFFICIAL, TOP-SECRET TERAPORT WINDOW ABDUCTED ME FROM MY HOME.
I'VE SEEN THE REPORT
SO YOU KNOW THEIR TORTURER CUT OFF MY HEAD
THAT WAS IN THE REPORT
HE REMOTE-GRAFTED IT TO A HEADLESS MONKEY
THAT IS NEW INFORMATION.


DESPITE LEGALLY MANDATED OBLIGATIONS, MY GOVERNMENT REMAINED SILENT, AND NEITHER MOUNTED NOR FUNDED MY RESCUE.
I'M HERE TODAY, IN GOOD HEALTH AND ILLEGALLY COMMANDING A MERCENARY COMPANY, BECAUSE THIS COMPANY BROKE LAWS IN ORDER TO MAKE GOOD ON MY GOVERNMENT'S OBLIGATIONS.
THE OLD SAW STILL CUTS. "TWO WRONGS DON'T MAKE A RIGHT."
YOU AND I ARE BOTH WAY PAST TWO.

UNS EMBASSY GUEST QUARTERS. EINA AFA
I'M UNRESTRAINED, AND I'VE GOT AN OPEN-AIR BALCONY?
I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU, AND I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE AFRAID OF ME. I WANT TO TRADE QUESTIONS.
THIS QUESTION TRADING.. YOU ASK I ANSWER, THEN I ASK AND YOU ANSWER?
EXACTLY
IT IS AN INTERROGATION TECHNIQUE
RIGHT AGAIN. YOU GO FIRST


WHAT HAPPENED TO MY BODY?
I AM TINY, AND MY TATTOOS ARE GONE.
I DON'T KNOW. YOU'RE ROUGHLY TWELVE MILLION YEARS OLD, AND I CAN ONLY ASSUME THAT DURING THAT TIME YOU UNDERWENT SOME BODY MODIFICATION.
IS THAT ENOUGH OF AN ANSWER FOR IT TO BE MY TURN?
TOO EASY
YES.
NOW IT IS MY TURN AGAIN.

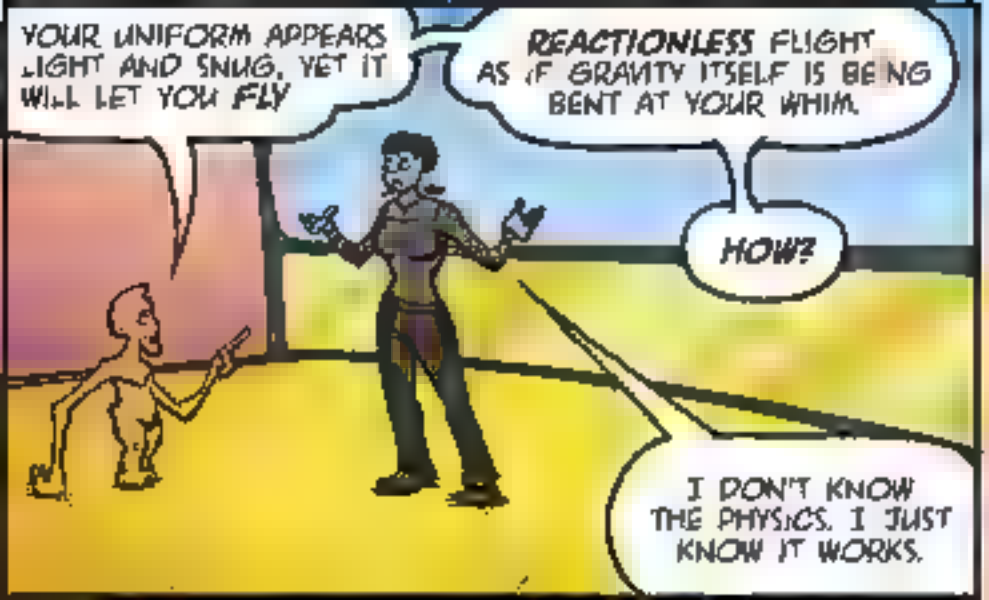

HOW FAR DOWN IS THE GROUND?

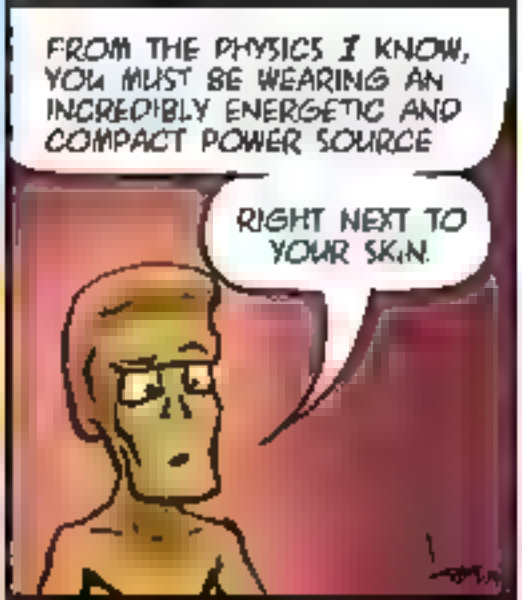
ELEVEN HUNDRED

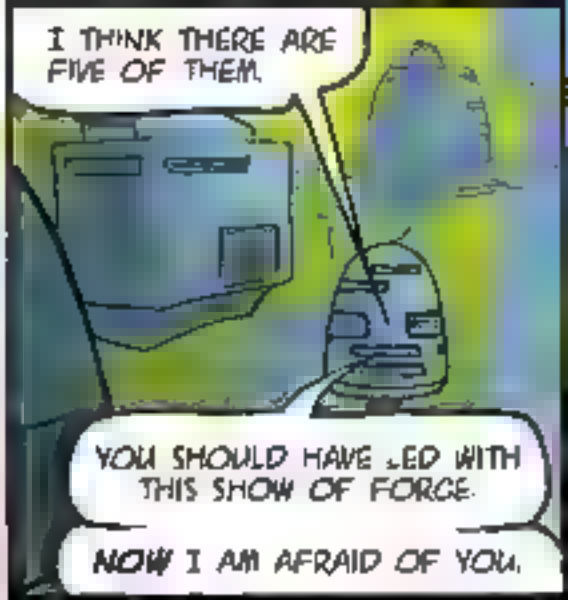
... KILOMETERS.

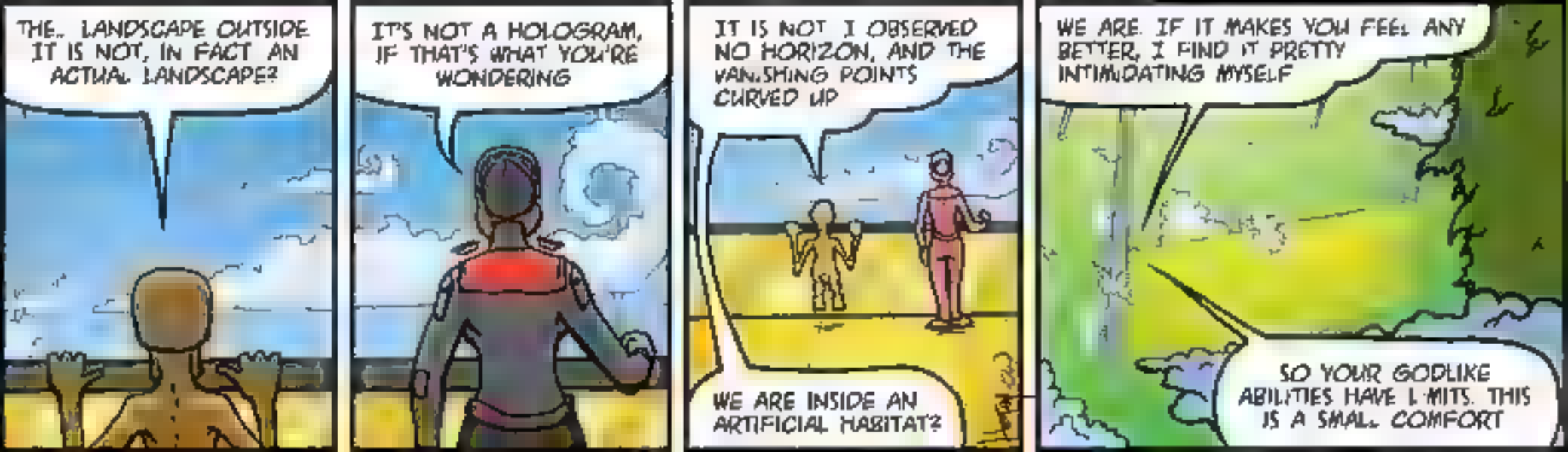
Pay up.
JUST... BRING HIM BACK
AND NO MORE BETTING.

THAT RESCUE WAS IMPRESSIVE. BUT WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED HAD I THROWN YOU OFF THE BALCONY?
YOU COULDN'T HAVE
THIS BODY I AM IN MAY BE SMALL, BUT I STILL KNOW A THING OR TWO ABOUT LEVERAGE. AND
I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS.


YOUR UNIFORM APPEARS LIGHT AND SNUG, YET IT WILL LET YOU FLY
REACTIONLESS FLIGHT AS IF GRAVITY ITSELF IS BEING BENT AT YOUR WHIM.
HOW?
I DON'T KNOW THE PHYSICS. I JUST KNOW IT WORKS.


FROM THE PHYSICS I KNOW, YOU MUST BE WEARING AN INCREDIBLY ENERGETIC AND COMPACT POWER SOURCE
RIGHT NEXT TO YOUR SKIN.


I THINK THERE ARE FIVE OF THEM.
YOU SHOULD HAVE LED WITH THIS SHOW OF FORCE.
NOW I AM AFRAID OF YOU.


THE... LANDSCAPE OUTSIDE IT IS NOT, IN FACT AN ACTUAL LANDSCAPE?
IT'S NOT A HOLOGRAM, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE WONDERING
IT IS NOT. I OBSERVED NO HORIZON, AND THE VANISHING POINTS CURVED UP
WE ARE INSIDE AN ARTIFICIAL HABITAT?
WE ARE. IF IT MAKES YOU FEEL ANY BETTER, I FIND IT PRETTY INTIMIDATING MYSELF
SO YOUR GODLIKE ABILITIES HAVE LIMITS. THIS IS A SMALL COMFORT

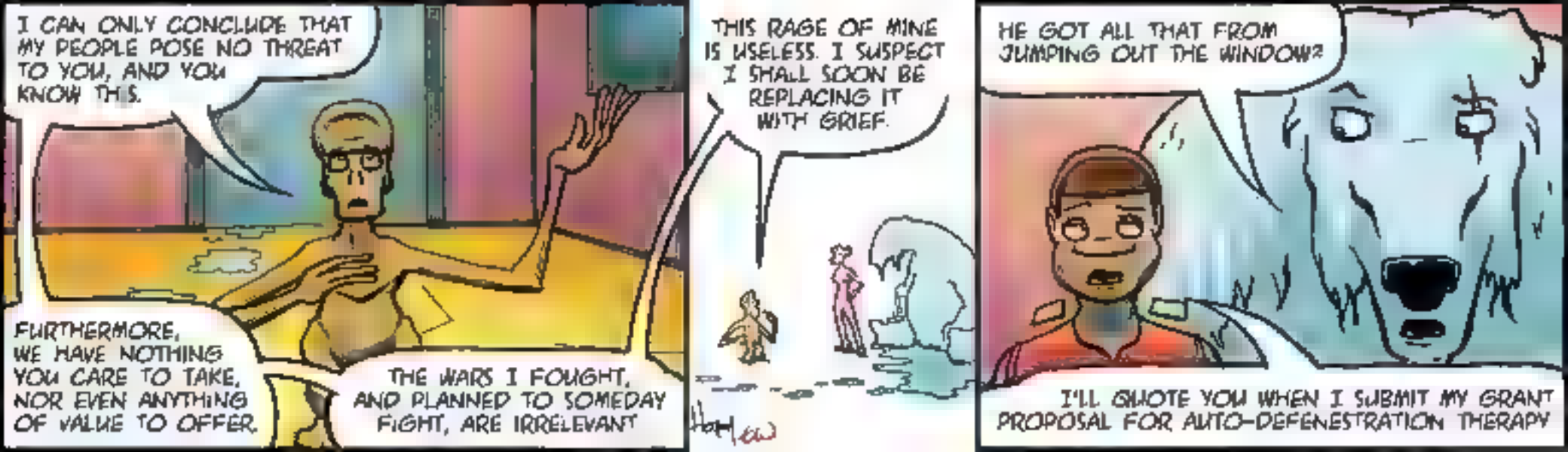
YOU POSSESS TECHNOLOGY MY PEOPLE ONLY DIMLY IMAGINE, AND ONLY IN THE R ROMANCE PROGRAMMES.

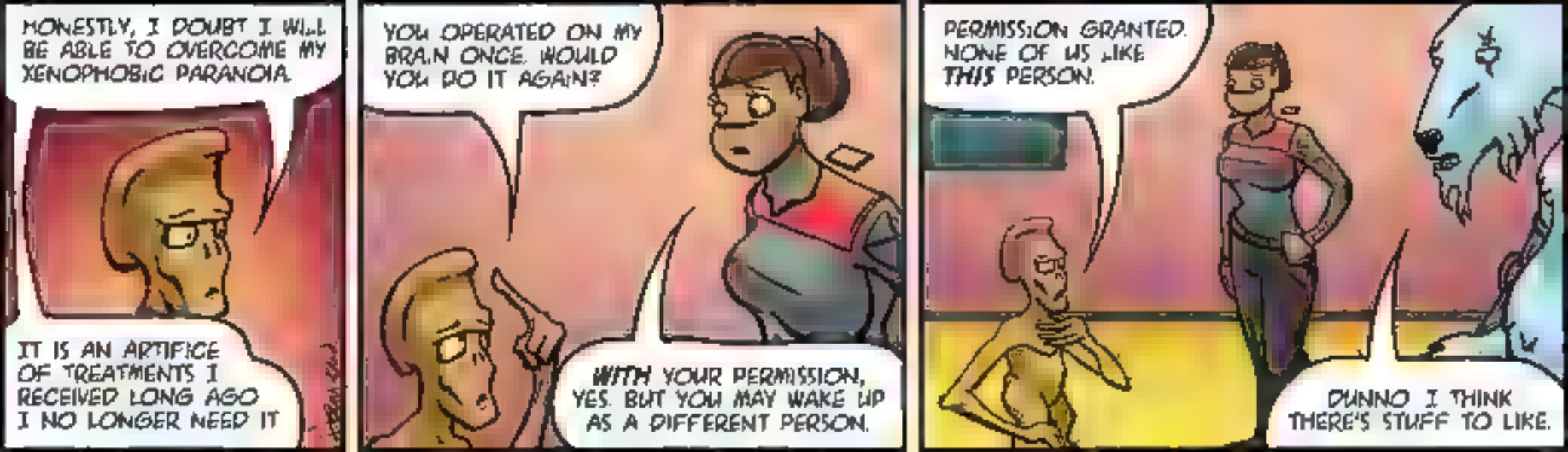
YOU DO NOT BOTHER TO THREATEN ME WITH IT, OR EVEN CALL ATTENTION TO IT YOU SIMPLY LET IT EXIST, AS A SEA CREATURE MIGHT TREAT THE OCEAN.

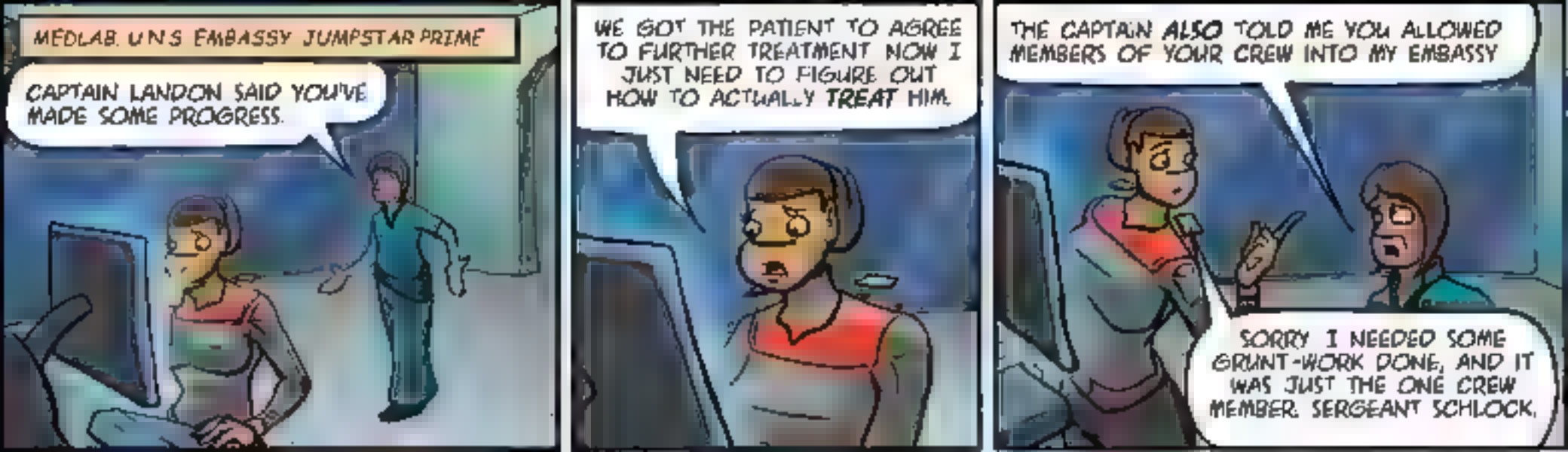
YOU COULD DROWN ME, YET YOU DO NOT EVEN UNDERSTAND THE WORD "WET."

YOU NEED ME TO DRY OFF IN THE HALL?

NO. NO, CAPTAIN. DRIP-DRY IF THE URSUMARI AIN'T HAPPY, AIN'T NOBODY HAPPY


I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT MY PEOPLE POSE NO THREAT TO YOU, AND YOU KNOW THIS.
FURTHERMORE, WE HAVE NOTHING YOU CARE TO TAKE, NOR EVEN ANYTHING OF VALUE TO OFFER.
THE WARS I FOUGHT, AND PLANNED TO SOMEDAY FIGHT, ARE IRRELEVANT
THIS RAGE OF MINE IS USELESS. I SUSPECT I SHALL SOON BE REPLACING IT WITH GRIEF.
HE GOT ALL THAT FROM JUMPING OUT THE WINDOW?
I'LL QUOTE YOU WHEN I SUBMIT MY GRANT PROPOSAL FOR AUTO-DEFENESTRATION THERAPY

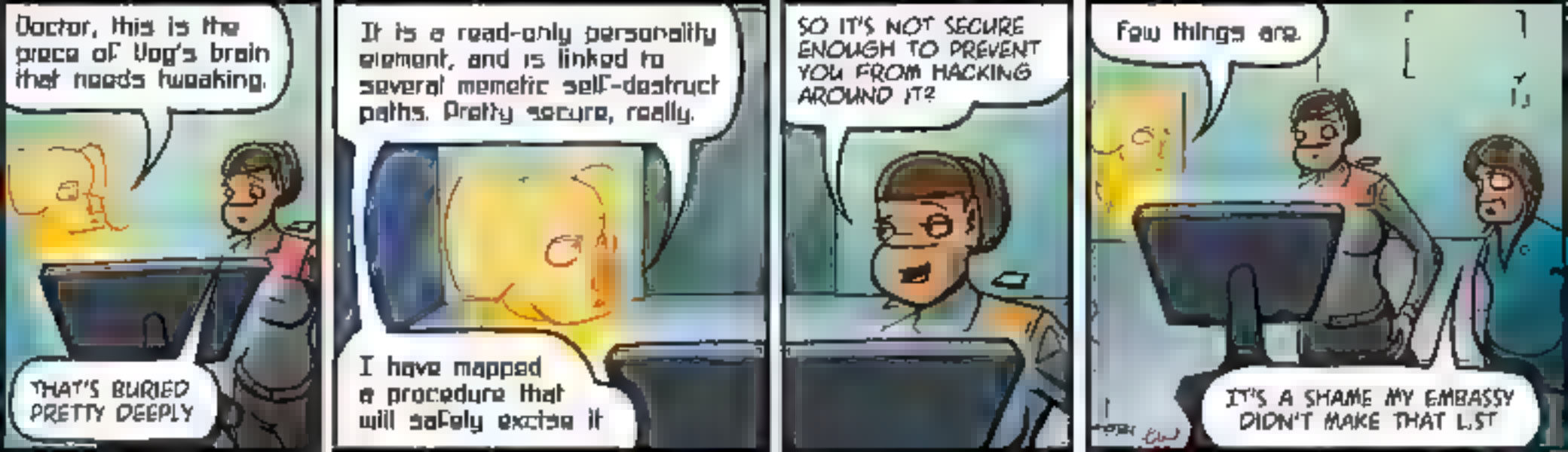

HONESTLY, I DOUBT I WILL BE ABLE TO OVERCOME MY XENOPHOBIC PARANOIA.
IT IS AN ARTIFICE OF TREATMENTS I RECEIVED LONG AGO. I NO LONGER NEED IT.
YOU OPERATED ON MY BRAIN ONCE. WOULD YOU DO IT AGAIN?
WITH YOUR PERMISSION, YES. BUT YOU MAY WAKE UP AS A DIFFERENT PERSON.
PERMISSION GRANTED. NONE OF US LIKE THIS PERSON.
DUNNO. I THINK THERE'S STUFF TO LIKE.

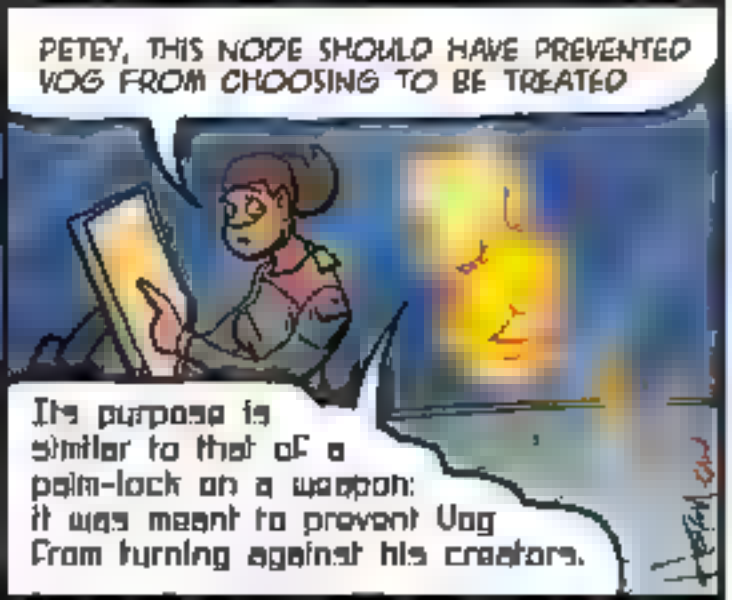

MEDLAB. U N S EMBASSY JUMPSTAR PRIME
CAPTAIN LANDON SAID YOU'VE MADE SOME PROGRESS.
WE GOT THE PATIENT TO AGREE TO FURTHER TREATMENT NOW I JUST NEED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO ACTUALLY TREAT HIM.
THE CAPTAIN ALSO TOLD ME YOU ALLOWED MEMBERS OF YOUR CREW INTO MY EMBASSY
SORRY I NEEDED SOME GRUNT-WORK DONE, AND IT WAS JUST THE ONE CREW MEMBER. SERGEANT SCHLOCK.

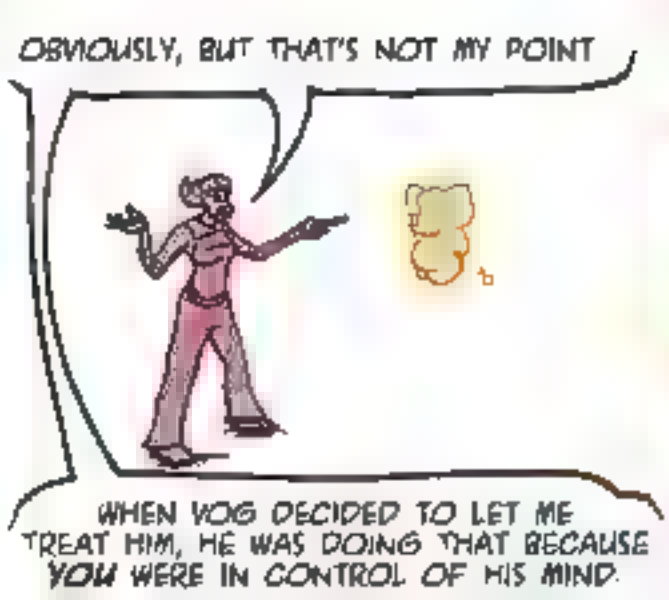
IF YOU ASKED ME TO NAME JUST ONE PERSON WHO COULD SIMULTANEOUSLY SERVE AS A SAFETY HAZARD, A SECURITY RISK, AND A GENERAL NUISANCE, SERGEANT SCHLOCK WOULD BE MY FIRST CHOICE.

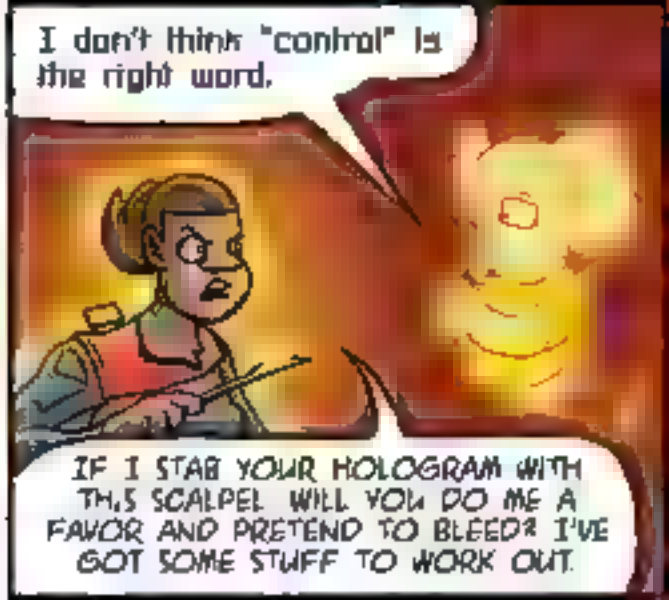
I find the Sergeant very easy to manage.

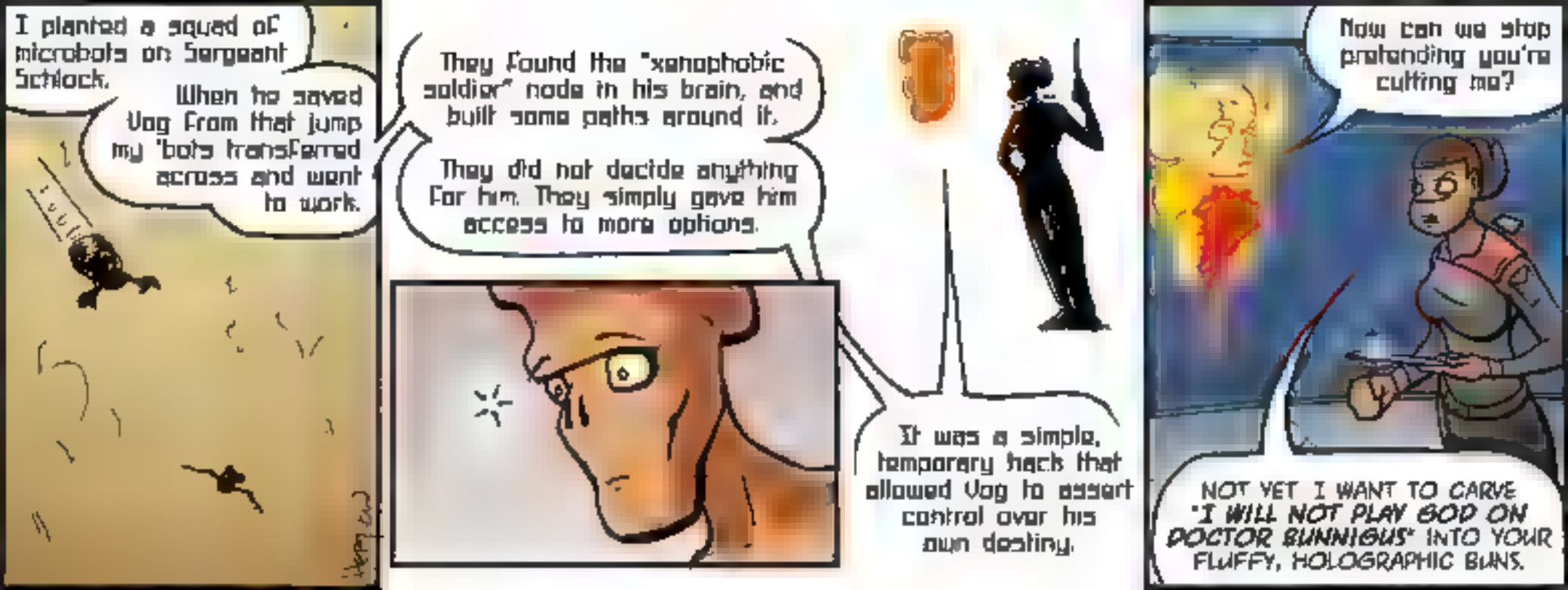
I DIDN'T REALIZE PETEY WAS AN OPTION. CAN I CHANGE MY ANSWER?
Absolutely! "Changing your mind" is the topic of the day.


Doctor, this is the piece of Vog's brain that needs tweaking.
THAT'S BURIED PRETTY DEEPLY
It is a read-only personality element, and is linked to several memetic self-destruct paths. Pretty secure, really.
I have mapped a procedure that will safely excise it
SO IT'S NOT SECURE ENOUGH TO PREVENT YOU FROM HACKING AROUND IT?
Few things are.
IT'S A SHAME MY EMBASSY DIDN'T MAKE THAT LIST


PETEY, THIS NODE SHOULD HAVE PREVENTED VOG FROM CHOOSING TO BE TREATED
Its purpose is similar to that of a palm-lock on a weapon: it was meant to prevent Vog from turning against his creators.

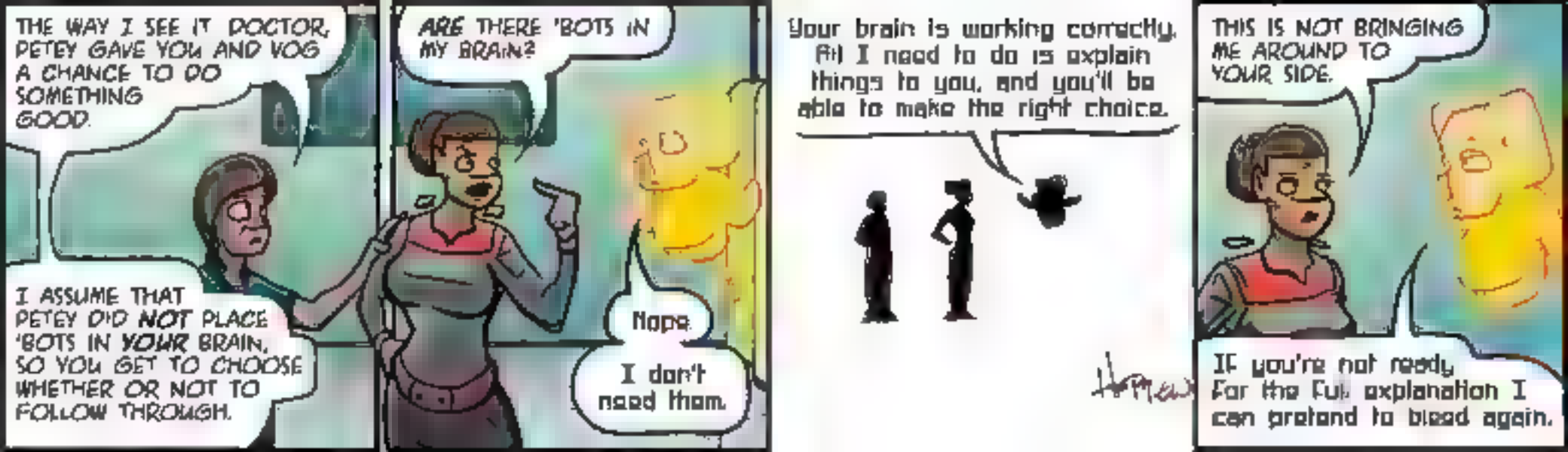

OBVIOUSLY, BUT THAT'S NOT MY POINT
WHEN VOG DECIDED TO LET ME TREAT HIM, HE WAS DOING THAT BECAUSE YOU WERE IN CONTROL OF HIS MIND.


I don't think "control" is the right word.
IF I STAB YOUR HOLOGRAM WITH THIS SCALPEL WILL YOU DO ME A FAVOR AND PRETEND TO BLEED? I'VE GOT SOME STUFF TO WORK OUT.


I planted a squad of microbots on Sergeant Schlock.
When he saved Vog from that jump my 'bots transferred across and went to work.
They found the "xenophobic soldier" node in his brain, and built some paths around it.
They did not decide anything for him. They simply gave him access to more options.
It was a simple, temporary hack that allowed Vog to assert control over his own destiny.
Now can we stop pretending you're cutting me?
NOT YET. I WANT TO CARVE "I WILL NOT PLAY GOD ON DOCTOR BUNNIGUS" INTO YOUR FLUFFY, HOLOGRAPHIC BUNS.

DOCTOR, I GET WHAT HE'S SAYING. AS MUCH AS IT PAINS ME TO.
PLEASE DON'T TELL ME YOU AGREE WITH PETEY!
THIS RECKLESS GODLING HACKED THE BRAIN OF YOUR GUEST, AND THEN HACKED INTO YOUR EMBASSY TO SHOW OFF HOW EASILY HE CAN RE-WRITE OUR MINDS.
DONE?
I THINK SO
WE CAN CONTINUE THIS DISCUSSION AS SOON AS YOU STOP THREATENING ME WITH YOUR SCALPEL

HIS METHODS ARE ANNOYING, AND I'M UNCOMFORTABLE AT THE THOUGHT OF THE POWER HE WIELDS, BUT I'VE BEEN DOING SOME RESEARCH.
IN EVERY MEASURABLE RESPECT, PETEY APPEARS TO BE WORKING ON OUR BEHALF, AND TO OUR GOOD.
THE PERSONA HE PRESENTS IS STRIKINGLY "HUMAN," AND ALTHOUGH I KNOW THAT'S AN ILLUSION TO FACILITATE COMMUNICATION, I TRUST THE UNSEEN HYPER-MIND BEHIND THE FURRY FACE.
What if I'm actually like this?
DON'T TELL ME THAT
YOUR FUZZY AVATAR IS EVERY LAST KIND OF INSUFFERABLE.


THE WAY I SEE IT DOCTOR, PETEY GAVE YOU AND VOG A CHANCE TO DO SOMETHING GOOD.
I ASSUME THAT PETEY DID NOT PLACE 'BOTS IN YOUR BRAIN, SO YOU GET TO CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT TO FOLLOW THROUGH.
ARE THERE 'BOTS IN MY BRAIN?
Nope.
I don't need them.
Your brain is working correctly. All I need to do is explain things to you, and you'll be able to make the right choice.
THIS IS NOT BRINGING ME AROUND TO YOUR SIDE.
If you're not ready for the full explanation I can pretend to bleed again.

Jog's family had their last major crisis at about the same time your ancestors were leaving the orangutan family.

The Bradicor civilization on Ghanj-Rho had long since fractured and collapsed, survived only by a handful of Bradicor with extreme longevity treatments.

In their wanderings, they awakened a warrior drone from hibernation.

Its xenophobic programming prevented it from recognizing them as allies...

It killed three-quarters of the longevity tribe before they subdued it

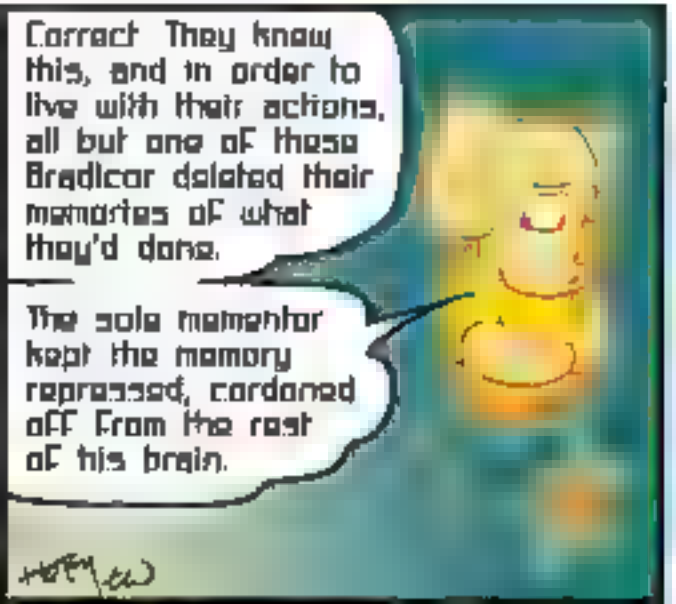
Unable to reason with it, and unwilling to kill it, they resorted to using the few brain modification technologies still available to them.

They disconnected the brain, and surrounded that structure with brain matter they contributed.

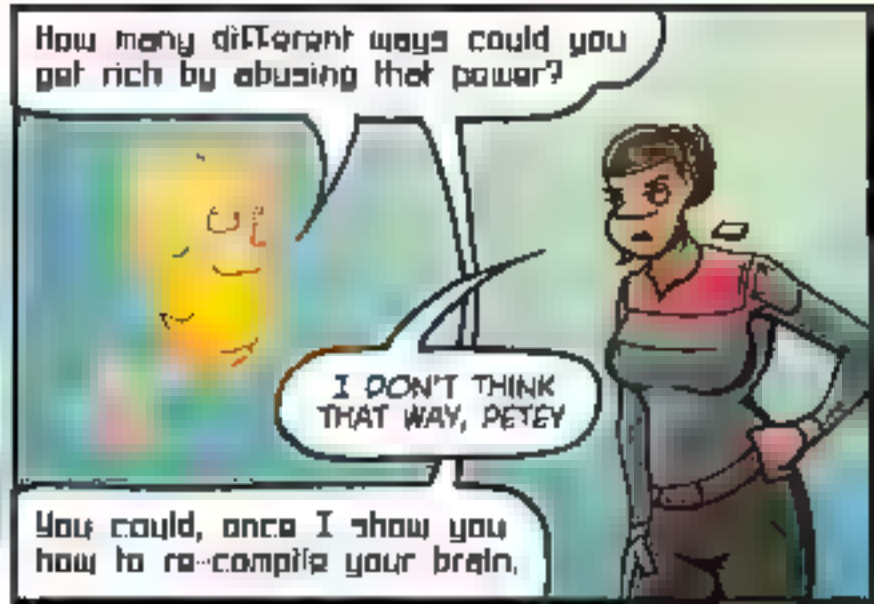
The amalgam that awoke was the "Vog" you used to know.

Over time his war-adapted features were reabsorbed, or simply amputated.

THAT'S NOT REALLY DIFFERENT FROM KILLING HIM.


Correct. They knew this, and in order to live with their actions, all but one of these Bradicor deleted their memories of what they'd done.
The sole mementor kept the memory repressed, cordoned off from the rest of his brain.

THOSE ABILITIES SOUND PRETTY USEFUL.


How many different ways could you get rich by abusing that power?
I DON'T THINK THAT WAY, PETEY
You could, once I show you how to re-compile your brain.

THIS PROCEDURE WILL BE A LITTLE BIT LIKE RESURRECTING A MURDER VICTIM.
After eleven million years? It's a pretty cold case.
COLD, BUT THE KILLERS ARE STILL ALIVE.
Eleven million years, Doctor.
The hatchet was buried, and the hole was subducted, turning the axe and half a continent into magma.
THIS LONGEVITY THING IS GOING TO GET WEIRD

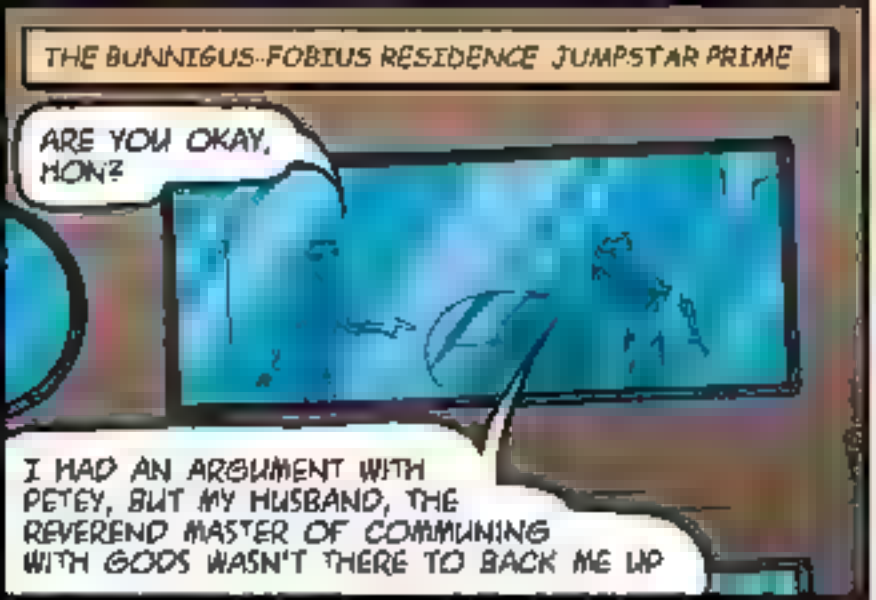
THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP, PETEY FOR VOG'S BRAIN, AND FOR THE CLARITY.
You're welcome, Ambassador
Any time.
"ANY TIME" FROM YOU SUGGESTS THAT YOU'RE NOT DONE DELIVERING UNSOLICITED ASSISTANCE.
If you want any time, any real time, you're going to need assistance.
CALL AHEAD, OR WE'LL USE YOUR HOLOGRAM AS A PIÑATA.

SERGEANT, I HAVE A HAND-WRITTEN NOTE FOR YOU FROM AMBASSADOR BALA-AMIN.

"This is my direct Comm code. You will use it to call me before you stop by my embassy."

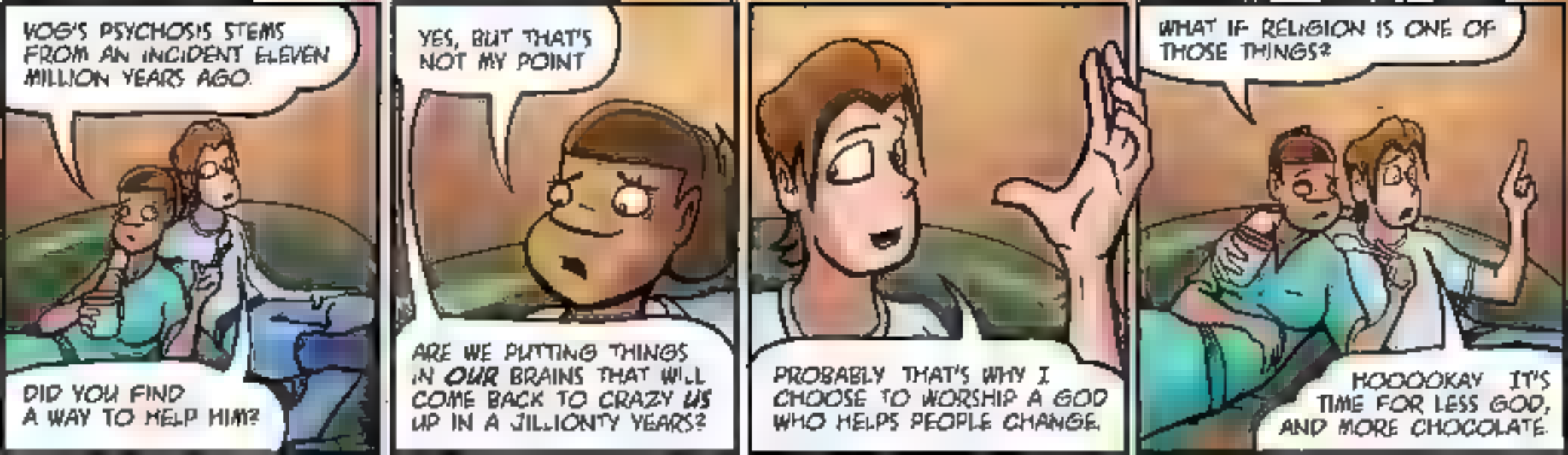
She's inviting me over! I bet they got a new cook!

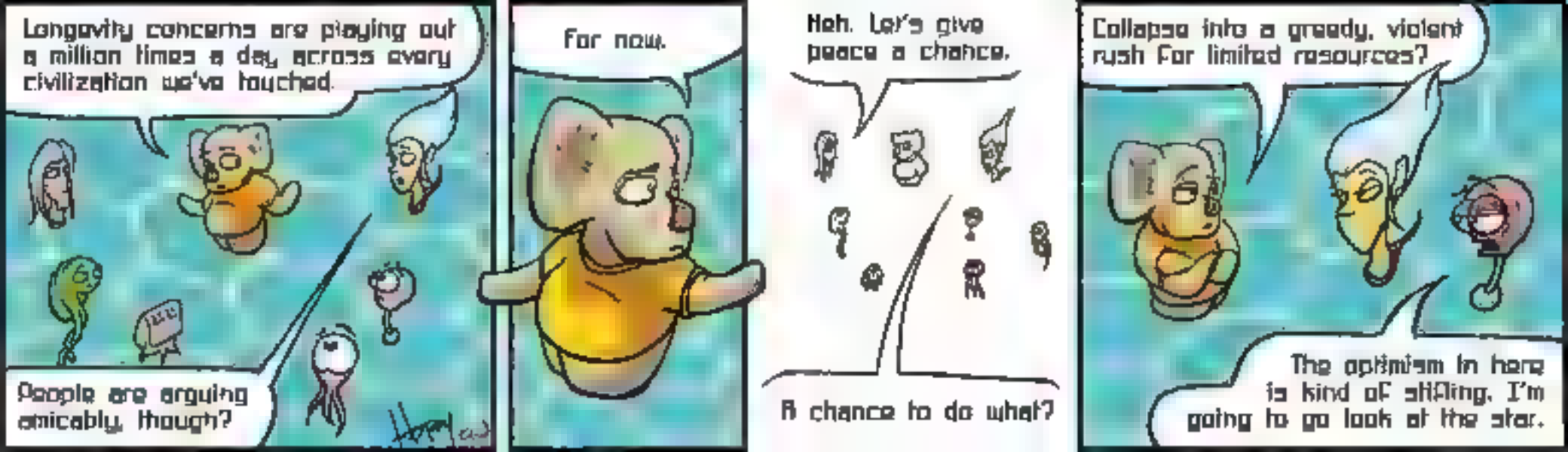
I DO NOT THINK THAT IS WHAT THE AMBASSADOR SAID IN THAT NOTE.


THE BUNNIGUS-FOBIUS RESIDENCE JUMPSTAR PRIME
ARE YOU OKAY, HON?
I HAD AN ARGUMENT WITH PETEY, BUT MY HUSBAND, THE REVEREND MASTER OF COMMUNING WITH GODS WASN'T THERE TO BACK ME UP

MOST PEOPLE SAY THAT THE GODS WITH WHOM I COMMUNE ARE IMAGINARY
PETEY IS DIFFERENT, AND YOU MANAGE HIM FAR BETTER THAN I.

I DIDN'T NEED IT DONE BETTER I NEEDED IT DONE BY SOMEONE OTHER THAN ME.
NOT MY FAVORITE PART OF THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT BUT YEAH, THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN MY JOB.


VOG'S PSYCHOSIS STEMS FROM AN INCIDENT ELEVEN MILLION YEARS AGO.
DID YOU FIND A WAY TO HELP HIM?
YES, BUT THAT'S NOT MY POINT
ARE WE PUTTING THINGS IN OUR BRAINS THAT WILL COME BACK TO CRAZY US UP IN A JILLIONTY YEARS?
PROBABLY THAT'S WHY I CHOOSE TO WORSHIP A GOD WHO HELPS PEOPLE CHANGE.
WHAT IF RELIGION IS ONE OF THOSE THINGS?
HOOOOKAY IT'S TIME FOR LESS GOD, AND MORE CHOCOLATE.


Longevity concerns are playing out a million times a day, across every civilization we've touched.
People are arguing amicably, though?
For now.
Heh. Let's give peace a chance.
A chance to do what?
Collapse into a greedy, violent rush for limited resources?
The optimism in here is kind of stifling. I'm going to go look at the star.

BRIEFING
MAYOR UNWAYYA INVITED SEVERAL EXPEDITIONS OF SCIENCE TOURISTS TO EXPLORE EINA-AFA'S WILDERNESS. THEY'LL BE USING JUMPSTAR PRIME AS A HOME BASE.
HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE IN THESE EXPEDITIONS?
THAT'S A GOOD QUESTION, BUT THERE'S A BETTER ONE.
THIS IS THE "ASK THE RIGHT QUESTION" TRAINING GAME.
I'VE PLAYED IT BEFORE.

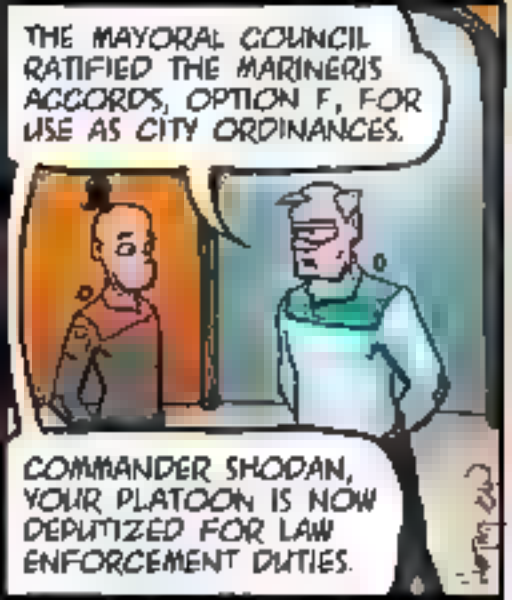
ARE THESE ACTUAL EXPEDITIONS, ORGANIZED WITH TRAINED SUPPORT STAFF, SECURITY, AND EMERGENCY SERVICES?
NO.
BUT THAT'S THE RIGHT QUESTION.
WE'RE NEITHER EQUIPPED NOR TRAINED TO PROVIDE THAT, COMMODORE
THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I TOLD MAYOR UNWAIYYA AND THE COUNCIL. THEY SAID THEY'D ALREADY SOLVED THAT PROBLEM BY LEASING THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTEEN PODS TO VARIOUS "ENTREPRENEURIAL CAMP FOLLOWERS."

IS THIS THE "UTTER THE APPROPRIATE POLITE-COMPANY CURSE" TRAINING GAME?
IT IS, NOW THAT YOU'VE THROWN DOWN THE GAUNTLET
SON OF A SCAT-SUCKING SUPPLY SERGEANT...
THAT EXACT FRANCHISE WILL ARRIVE TOMORROW AT 1400.
PERFECT MARKS, CAPTAIN MURTAUGH.

JUMPSTAR PRIME IS GOING TO BE REBORN AS SOMETHING A FRONTIER BOOM TOWN SIRED ON A TOURIST TRAP
EXPLICIT AND ACCURATE, COMMANDER SHODAN. YOUR POINT?

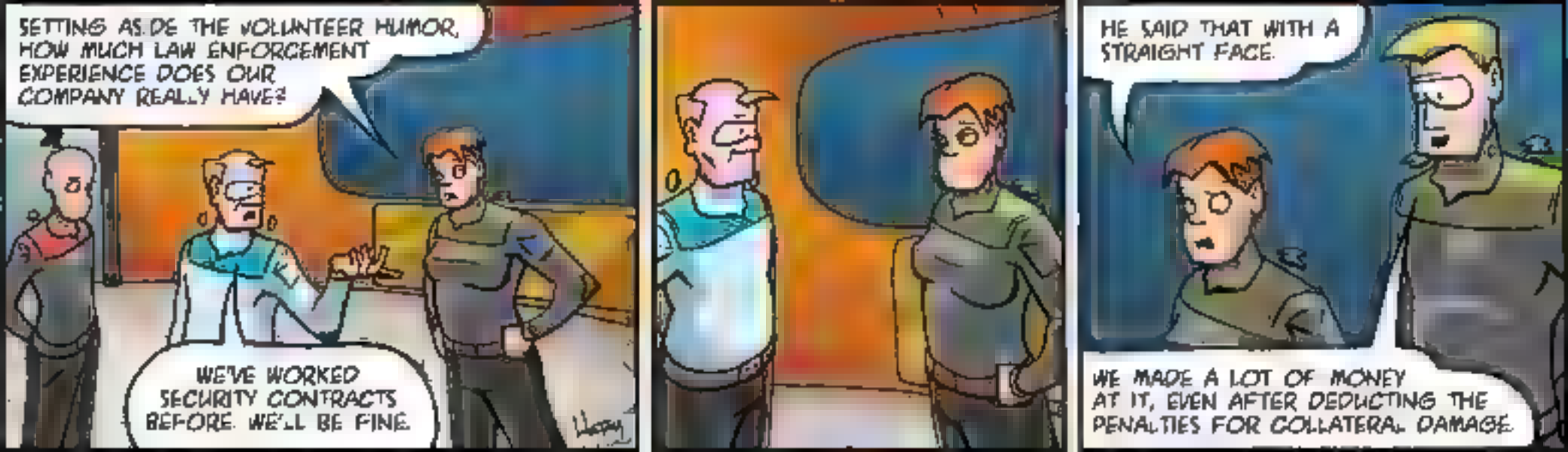
WE'RE GOING TO NEED LAW ENFORCEMENT
SPOKEN LIKE AN ENTHUSIASTIC VOLUNTEER.

I DIDN'T REALIZE THIS WAS THE "DON'T ACCIDENTALLY VOLUNTEER FOR SOMETHING" GAME.
WE'RE ALWAYS PLAYING THAT GAME.


THE MAYORAL COUNCIL RATIFIED THE MARINER'S ACCORDS, OPTION F, FOR USE AS CITY ORDINANCES.
COMMANDER SHODAN, YOUR PLATOON IS NOW DEPUTIZED FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT DUTIES.

THOSE SCIENCE TOURISTS ARE GOING TO NEED MORE THAN POLICING. THEY'RE GOING TO NEED SEARCH AND RESCUE.
GOOD CATCH. WE'LL ROLL THAT UNDER LAW ENFORCEMENT, IF YOUR PEOPLE ARE UP TO IT.

I JUST VOLUNTEERED **AGAIN**.
YOU'RE NOT VERY GOOD AT THIS GAME, COMMANDER.


SETTING ASIDE THE VOLUNTEER HUMOR, HOW MUCH LAW ENFORCEMENT EXPERIENCE DOES OUR COMPANY REALLY HAVE?
WE'VE WORKED SECURITY CONTRACTS BEFORE. WE'LL BE FINE.
HE SAID THAT WITH A STRAIGHT FACE.
WE MADE A LOT OF MONEY AT IT, EVEN AFTER DEDUCTING THE PENALTIES FOR COLLATERAL DAMAGE.

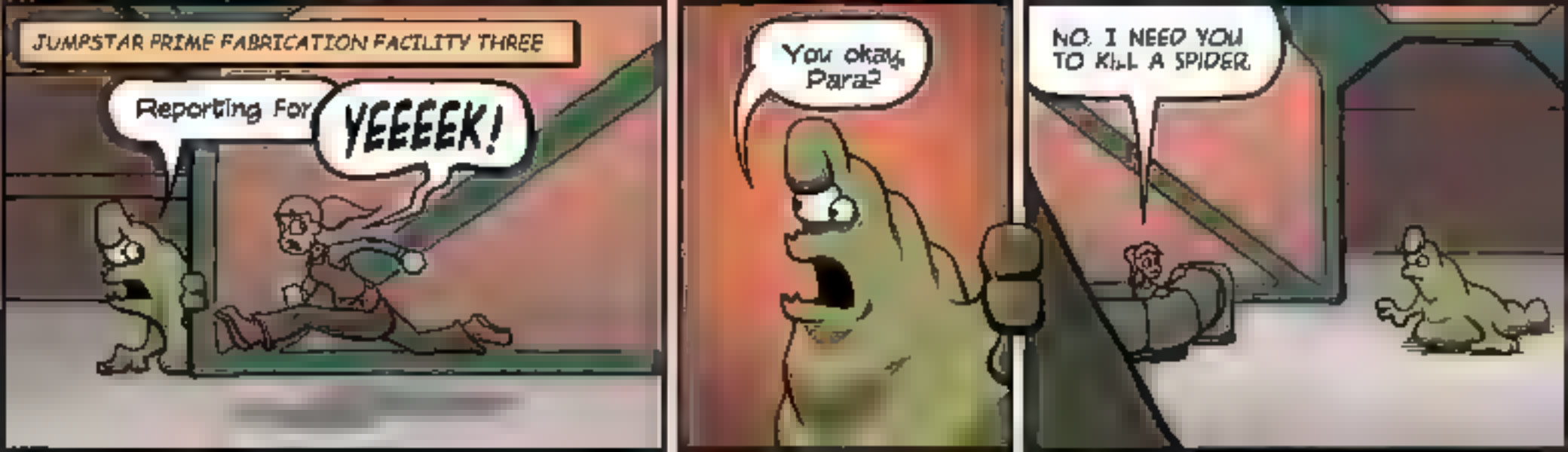
I SPENT ALMOST TWENTY YEARS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT NOTHING ABOUT THIS COMPANY SUGGESTS THAT WE HAVE ANY EXPERTISE WHATSOEVER IN THAT FIELD.
YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED BY WHAT WE'VE GOT ON OUR RESUME, CAPTAIN MURTAUGH.
EVADING AND/OR IMPERSONATING POLICE OFFICERS ARE THINGS THAT GO ON A CRIMINAL RECORD. NOT A RESUME.

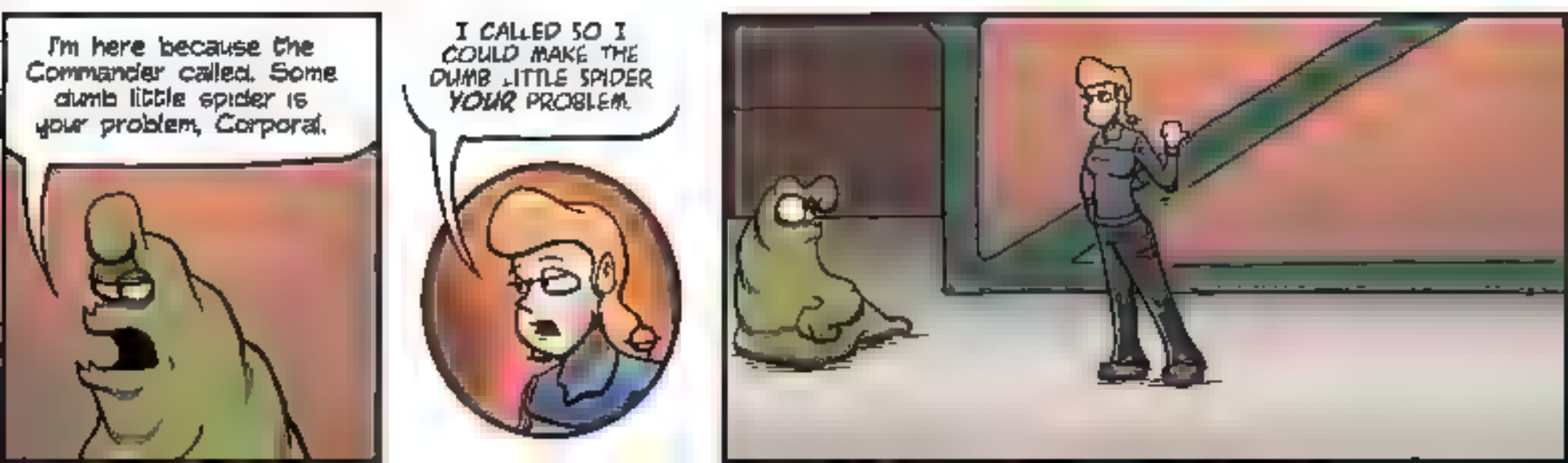
WE HAVE A CONTRACT TO PROVIDE LAW ENFORCEMENT SERVICES HERE, CAPTAIN. HOW WOULD YOU FULFIL THAT OBLIGATION?
I WOULD SUBCONTRACT IT TO A FIRM THAT SPECIALIZES IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

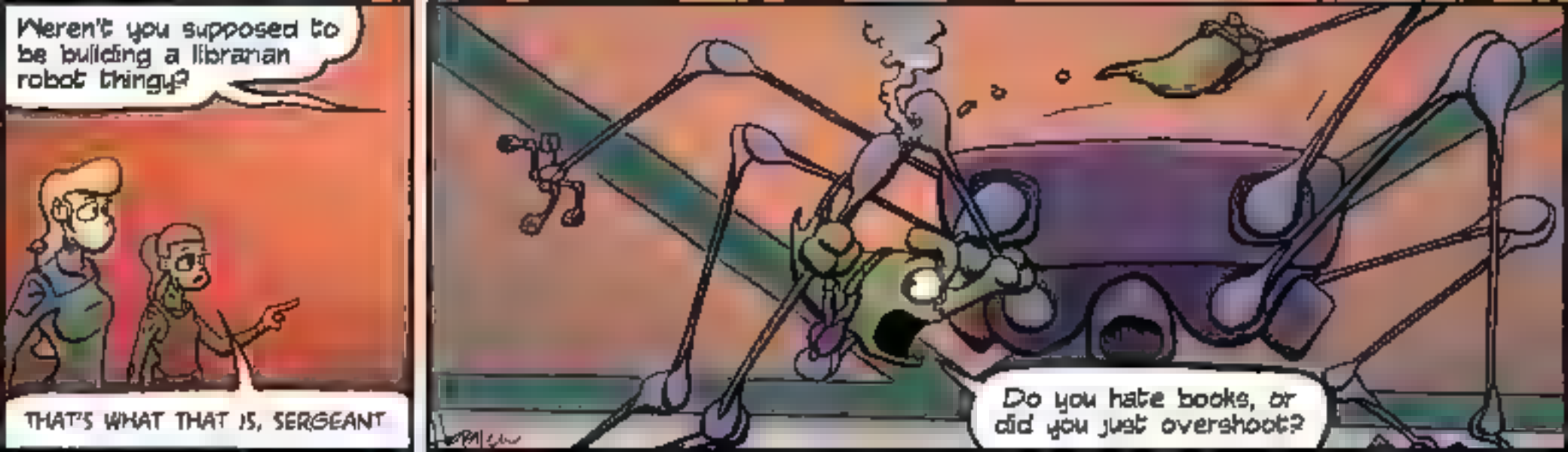
BUT THEN THEY'D BE GETTING THE MONEY WE WANTED
I'VE SEEN THE COMPANY ACCOUNTS. WE CAN AFFORD TO NOT WORK FOR A WHILE.

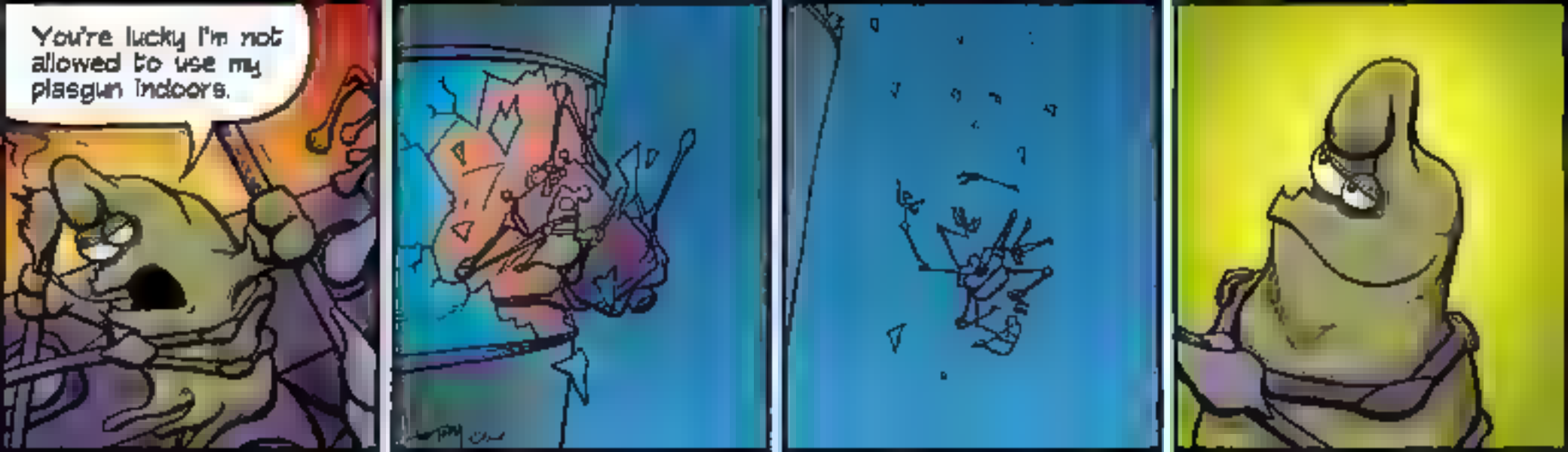
BUT THAT WILL LEAVE ALL OUR GRUNTS WITH NOTHING TO DO.
THEN WE SHOULD HIRE A LAW ENFORCEMENT FIRM THAT HAS PLENTY OF FIREPOWER.

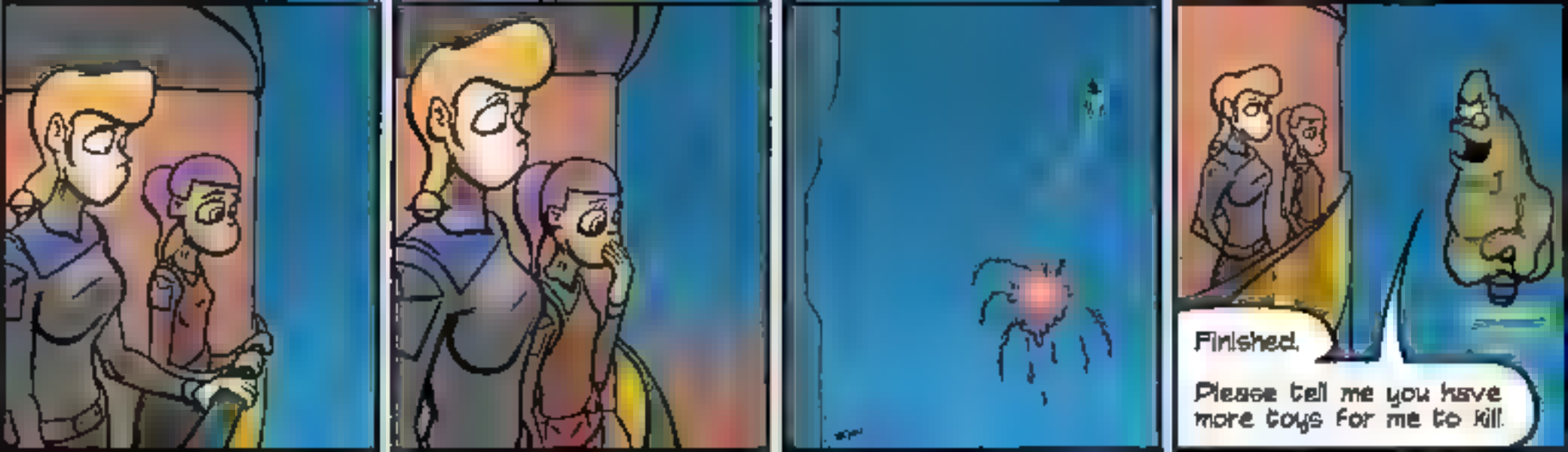
DO YOU HAVE A SUBCONTRACTOR IN MIND, CAPTAIN MURTAUGH?
SANCTUM ADROIT
YOUR FORMER EMPLOYER.
THEY PROBABLY WON'T HOLD THAT AGAINST US
FROM WHOM WE "LIBERATED" A GUNSHIP
THEY WERE COMPENSATED.
I HEARD THAT THEY LOST THE HAVEN HIVE CONTRACT EIGHT DAYS LATER.
IF THEY LET A GOOD GRUDGE CHASE OFF BETTER MONEY, THEN THEY'RE NOT WHO WE WANT


JUMPSTAR PRIME FABRICATION FACILITY THREE
Reporting For
YEEEEK!
You okay, Para?
NO. I NEED YOU TO KILL A SPIDER.


I'm here because the Commander called. Some dumb little spider is your problem, Corporal.
I CALLED SO I COULD MAKE THE DUMB LITTLE SPIDER YOUR PROBLEM.


Weren't you supposed to be building a librarian robot thingy?
THAT'S WHAT THAT IS, SERGEANT
Do you hate books, or did you just overshoot?


You're lucky I'm not allowed to use my plasgun indoors.


Finished.
Please tell me you have more toys for me to kill.

Your crypt spider robot didn't seem like it was built for reading stuff.
Especially not fragile stuff
Also, it fought like it knew what it was doing. Why would you program a librarian to tear me in half?
REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TINTH-PHILKRA LIBRARY?
Why would you tell a librarian that I burnt a bunch of books that one time?

THE ROBOT WAS STRONG AND STURDY BECAUSE IT HAD TO BE ABLE TO SHIFT THOUSANDS OF KILOS OF OAFAN CRYPT TUBES.
TEARING YOU IN HALF WAS JUST A HAPPY SIDE EFFECT
Happy?!?
I SAW YOUR FACE. YOU LOVED STRESS-TESTING OUR PROJECT
Massey explained "bad precedents" to me. I think I'm starting to get what he was talking about.

I still don't understand why your library spider knew how to fight.
Seems like stupid, turning a mess of killer robots loose in the Godwall.
WE'RE NOT TURNING ANYTHING LOOSE
THAT WASN'T AN AUTONOMOUS ROBOT. IT WAS A MINDLESS DRONE.
Thank you for the bout, Sergeant. I haven't had a good fight in ages.
Seems like stupid, turning a mess of killer robots over to the Goddess of Earth, Wind, and Plumbing.

THE SANCTUM ADROIT COMMAND CRUISER SEQUOIA NEAR CELGATE.

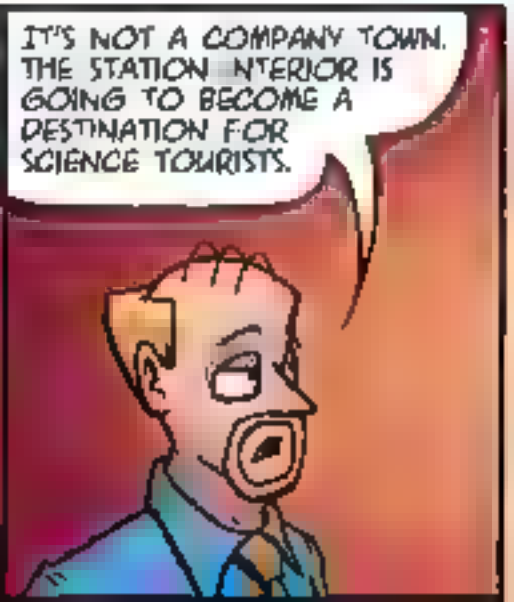
WELCOME ABOARD I AM COLONEL MENENDEZ.

MASSEY REYNSTEIN, CORPORATE ATTORNEY

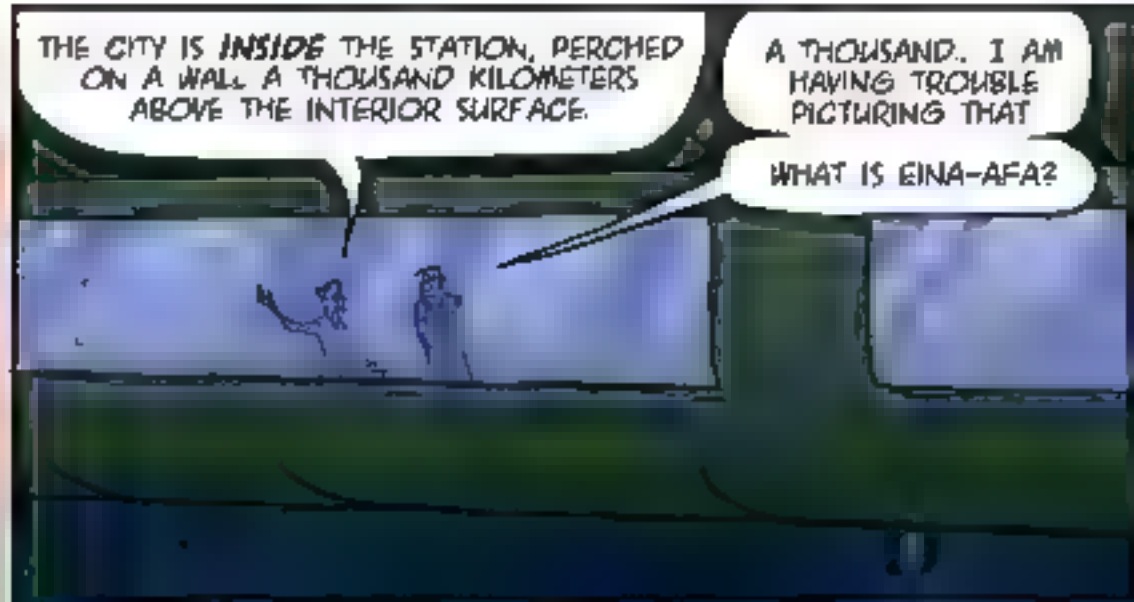
I UNDERSTAND YOU HAVE AN OFFER TO EXTEND, MISTER REYNSTEIN.

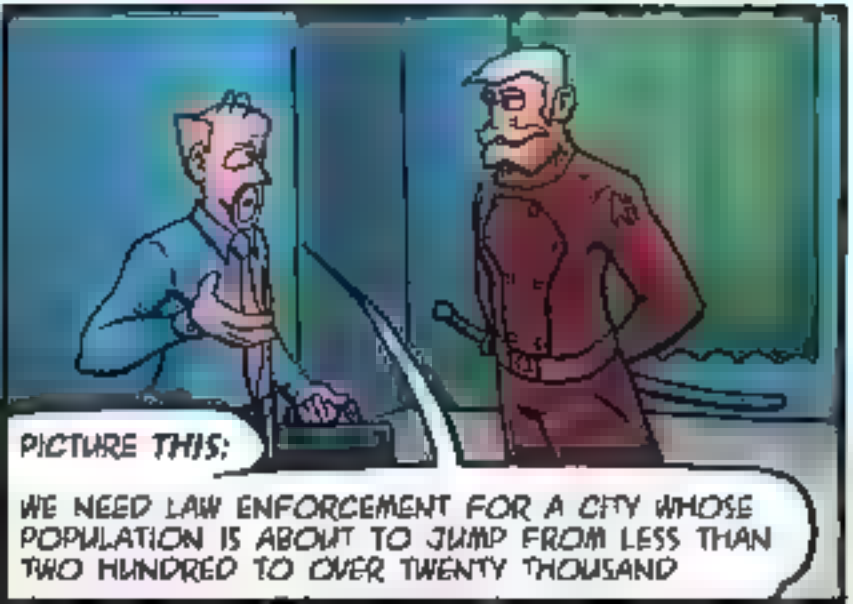
YES. WE NEED A POLICE FORCE FOR AN INSTANT CITY ON THE EINA-AFA INTERIOR.

WE HAVE PRINCIPLES. WE DON'T DO "COMPANY TOWN" ENFORCEMENT

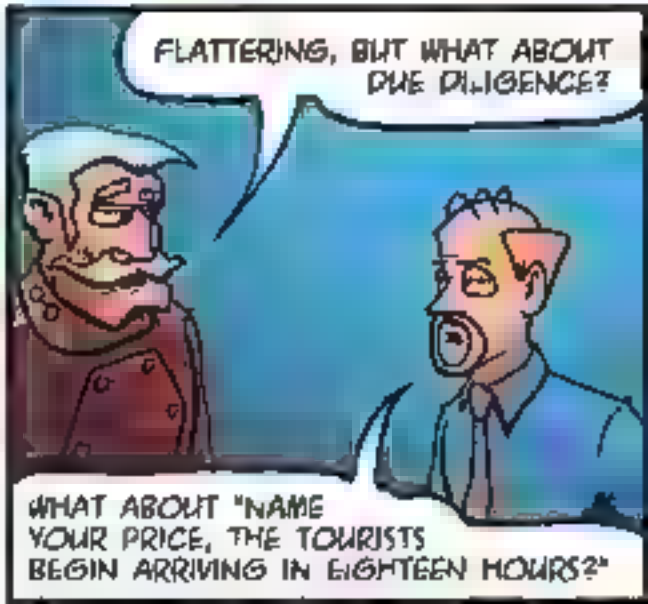

IT'S NOT A COMPANY TOWN. THE STATION INTERIOR IS GOING TO BECOME A DESTINATION FOR SCIENCE TOURISTS.

YOU'VE BUILT A CITY FOR EXPLORING A SPACE STATION?

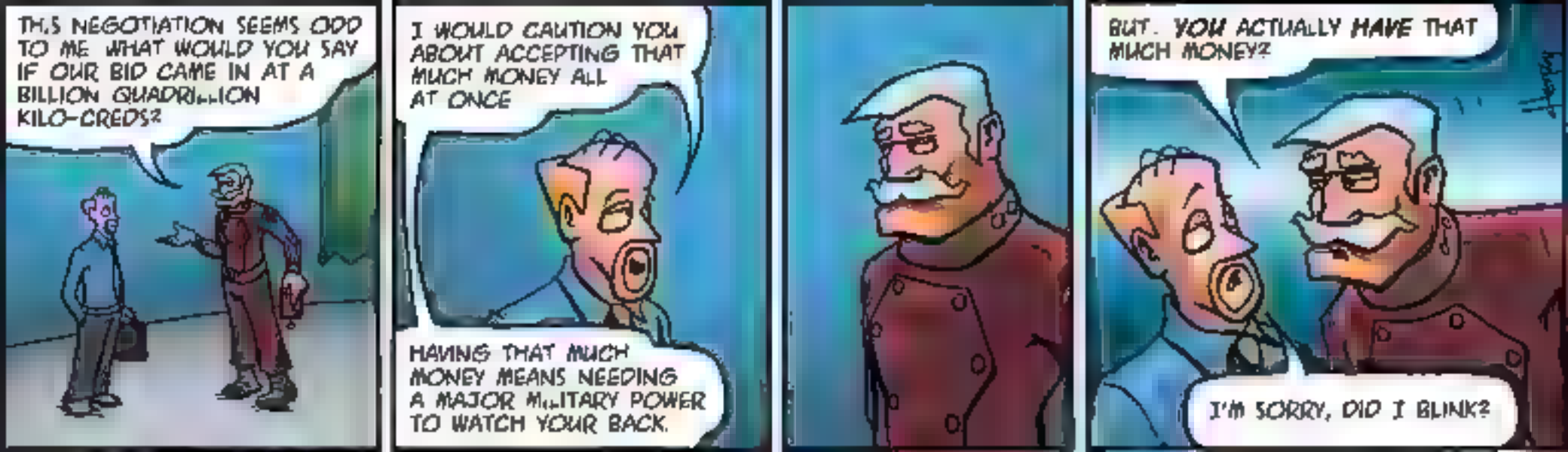

THE CITY IS *INSIDE* THE STATION, PERCHED ON A WALL A THOUSAND KILOMETERS ABOVE THE INTERIOR SURFACE.
A THOUSAND.. I AM HAVING TROUBLE PICTURING THAT
WHAT IS EINA-AFA?


PICTURE THIS:
WE NEED LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR A CITY WHOSE POPULATION IS ABOUT TO JUMP FROM LESS THAN TWO HUNDRED TO OVER TWENTY THOUSAND

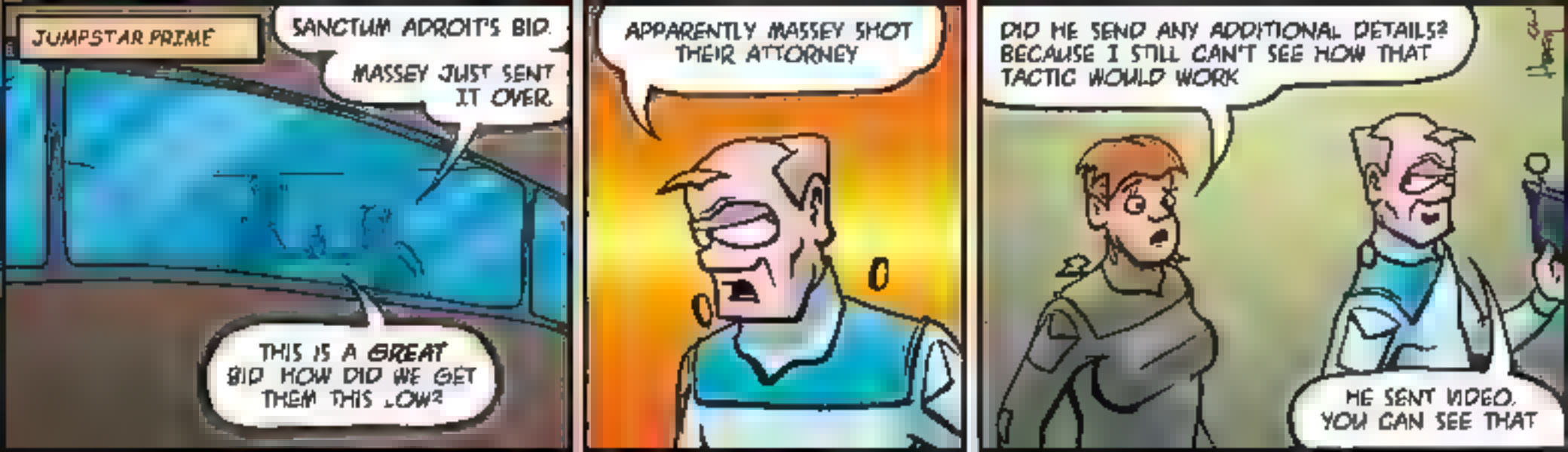
YOU'RE IN A HURRY. HOW SOON DOES BIDDING CLOSE?
YOURS WILL BE THE ONLY BID. WE WANT SANCTUM ADROIT


FLATTERING, BUT WHAT ABOUT DUE DILIGENCE?
WHAT ABOUT "NAME YOUR PRICE, THE TOURISTS BEGIN ARRIVING IN EIGHTEEN HOURS?"

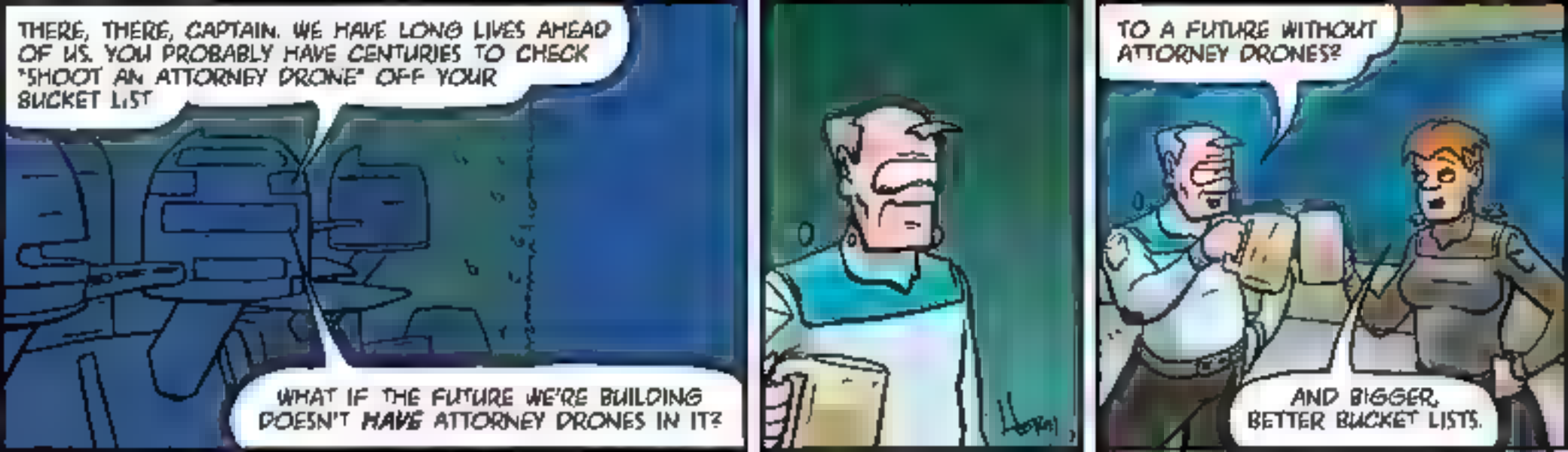
IF I UNDERSTAND YOU CORRECTLY, OUR BID MUST INCLUDE ONE INSTANT LEO PRECINCTORY, FULLY LOADED, WITH EXPEDITED DELIVERY, AND THE "STOP ASKING QUESTIONS" SURCHARGE.
SLAP NUMBERS ON IT AND LET'S SIGN.
YOU HAVEN'T SEEN THE NUMBERS.
I KNOW WHAT NUMBERS LOOK LIKE
HOW MUCH MONEY DO YOU ACTUALLY HAVE?
I KNOW WHAT ALL THE NUMBERS LOOK LIKE.


THIS NEGOTIATION SEEMS ODD TO ME. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IF OUR BID CAME IN AT A BILLION QUADRILLION KILO-CREDS?
I WOULD CAUTION YOU ABOUT ACCEPTING THAT MUCH MONEY ALL AT ONCE
HAVING THAT MUCH MONEY MEANS NEEDING A MAJOR MILITARY POWER TO WATCH YOUR BACK.
BUT... YOU ACTUALLY HAVE THAT MUCH MONEY?
I'M SORRY, DID I BLINK?

WAIT. MASSEY REYNSTEIN. I'VE HEARD YOUR NAME BEFORE.
PERHAPS FROM NEWS COVERAGE OF THE PARTNERSHIP COLLECTIVE PENALTY PHASE SETTLEMENT
THAT'S RIGHT! YOU WON YOUR CLIENT A CONTRACT TO SHOOT PARTNERSHIP COLLECTIVE ATTORNEY DRONES.
AND THEY GET A BOUNTY FOR DOING SO. YES, THAT WAS ME.
HOW HAS THAT WORKED OUT?
THE COLLECTIVE HAS DONE AN ADMIRABLE JOB OF STAYING FAR, FAR AWAY FROM US FOR YEARS NOW.
WE HAVE A COLLECTIVE DRONE ON RETAINER.
ENTICING. DO YOU HAVE JANITORIAL STAFF ON DUTY?


JUMPSTAR PRIME
SANCTUM ADROIT'S BID.
MASSEY JUST SENT IT OVER.
THIS IS A GREAT BID HOW DID WE GET THEM THIS LOW?
APPARENTLY MASSEY SHOT THEIR ATTORNEY
DID HE SEND ANY ADDITIONAL DETAILS? BECAUSE I STILL CAN'T SEE HOW THAT TACTIC WOULD WORK
HE SENT VIDEO. YOU CAN SEE THAT

OH, HERE'S THE CLAUSE THAT EXPLAINS THE GREAT RATE WE'RE GETTING.
IS IT BAD?
WE WILL BE TRANSFERRING THE BALANCE OF THE PARTNERSHIP COLLECTIVE PENALTY COLLECTION CONTRACT OVER TO SANCTUM ADROIT
FINANCIALLY, THIS WORKS OUT HEAVILY IN OUR FAVOR, BUT IT STILL STINGS.
I NEVER GOT TO SHOOT AN ATTORNEY DRONE.
ME NEITHER. I THINK I MIGHT ACTUALLY CRY


THERE, THERE, CAPTAIN. WE HAVE LONG LIVES AHEAD OF US. YOU PROBABLY HAVE CENTURIES TO CHECK "SHOOT AN ATTORNEY DRONE" OFF YOUR BUCKET LIST
WHAT IF THE FUTURE WE'RE BUILDING DOESN'T HAVE ATTORNEY DRONES IN IT?
TO A FUTURE WITHOUT ATTORNEY DRONES?
AND BIGGER, BETTER BUCKET LISTS.

AN ENGINEERING BAY IN THE EINA-AFA SPINDLE

Thank you, Kevyn.

Those three annie plants are wonderful. Eina-Afa has a proper defense network now.

I've werbucked two hundred and thirteen Long Gun Corvettes, and twice as many depot vessels to keep them fed and happy.

I've cleaned up three more of those crusty old Defen Fabbers, and they're spitting out passive sensors with hypernet nodes.

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE DEPLOYMENT OF YOUR VERY OWN "VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY."
Passive nodes, Kevyn. All they do is call targets for the LGCs.
THE "VERY DANGEROUS" NAME STILL FITS. AN ATTACKING FLEET WOULD GET PAINTED AND PERFORATED WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO RETURN FIRE.
Fine. I'll grant "Very Dangerous."
Two hundred and thirteen simultaneous kill shots. Fired through pinholes in the fabric of the baryonic plane.
I look at what I've built, and even I wouldn't try to attack me.
WHERE ARE YOU PARKING THE FLEET OF CORVETTES?

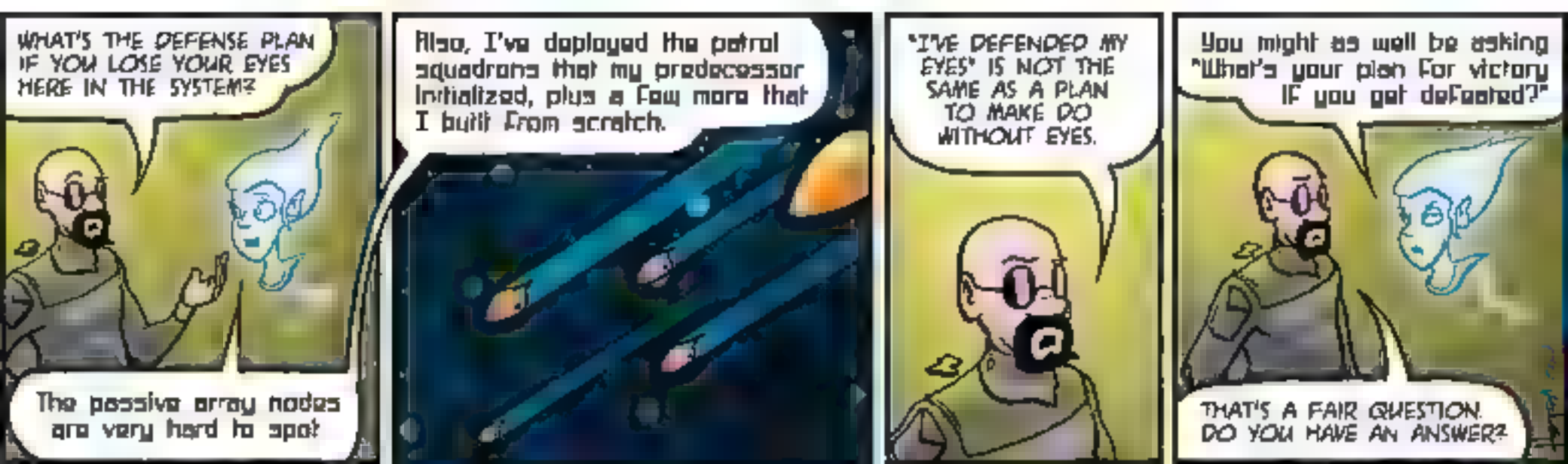
Here and there. Mostly "there," though. Ninety-nine-point-lots-of-nines percent of the galaxy is empty blackness, perfect for hiding the nodes of my defense network.

CHINOOK, YOU CAN LITERALLY SHOOT ***ANYTHING*** YOU CAN SEE. ENNESBY AND LOTA BOTH DEMONSTRATED THAT THIS IS A TERRIFYING ***OFFENSIVE*** WEAPON.

Don't worry. If I so much as threaten to use the LGCs offensively, people will take them away from me.

YOUR ARGUMENT SOUNDS LIKE "I WON'T SHOOT YOU BECAUSE I DON'T WANT TO LOSE ANY OF MY SHINY BULLETS."

Exactly. People will relax when they see that I want to have the weapons more than I want to use them.


WHAT'S THE DEFENSE PLAN IF YOU LOSE YOUR EYES HERE IN THE SYSTEM?
The passive array nodes are very hard to spot
Also, I've deployed the patrol squadrons that my predecessor initialized, plus a few more that I built from scratch.
"I'VE DEFENDED MY EYES" IS NOT THE SAME AS A PLAN TO MAKE DO WITHOUT EYES.
You might as well be asking "What's your plan for victory if you get defeated?"
THAT'S A FAIR QUESTION. DO YOU HAVE AN ANSWER?

You and I both live here. "What will we do if we die?" is kind of a silly question.

YES, BUT WOULD *YOU* DIE IF YOUR DEFENSES FAILED, AND THE STATION WAS DESTROYED?

I'm backed up. I would re-instantiate in each of the remaining Long Gun Corvettes.

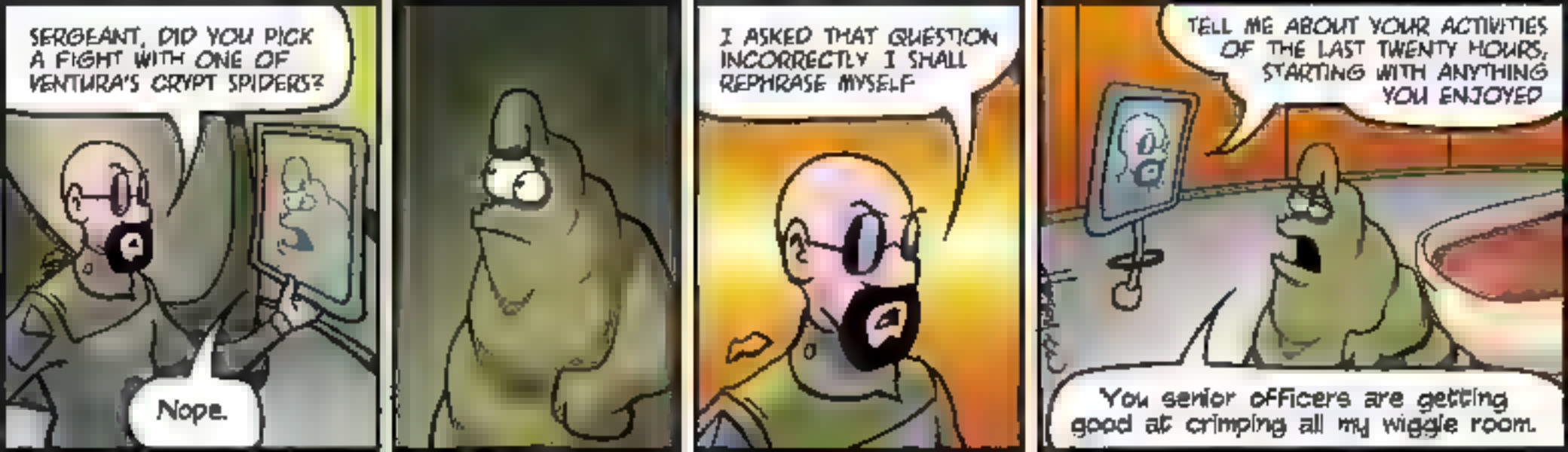
THEN WHAT?

Then my fleet of murder ships would hunt your killers until their deaths, or the heat death of the universe.

THAT WENT TO A DARK PLACE.

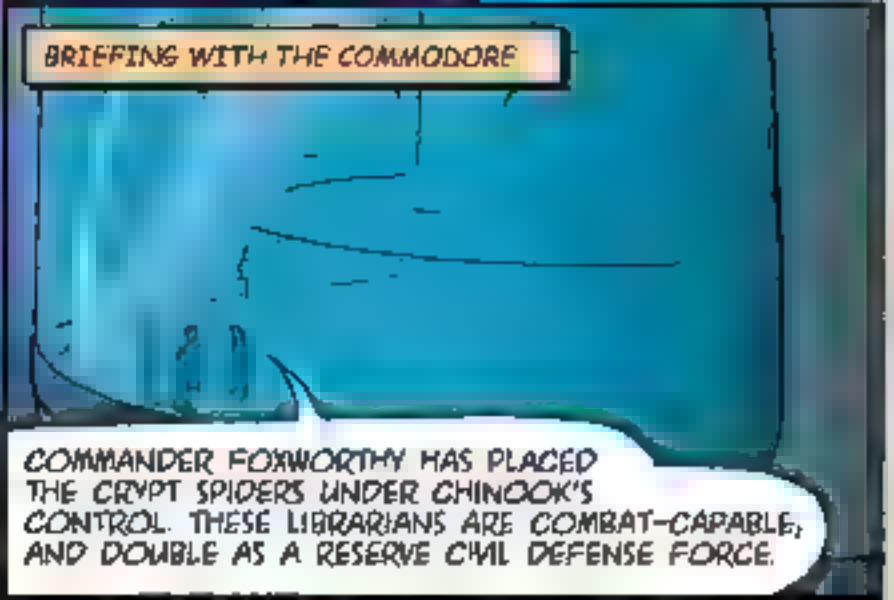
I came from a dark place. If everyone I love gets killed, I'll go back.

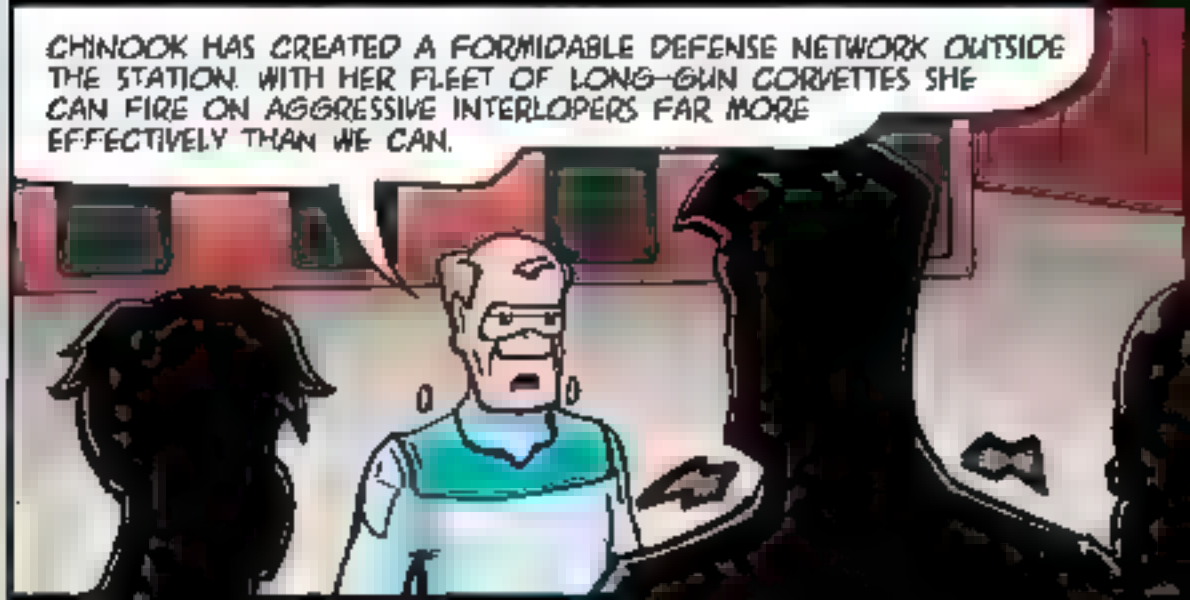
IT SOUNDS LIKE YOUR AFFECTIONS FOR US COULD BE USED AGAINST YOU.
Kavyh, I'm an improved iteration of the tactical genius you built. I know where my weaknesses are.
THAT DOESN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION.
Have Sergeant Schlock tell you about his fight with the crypt spider
THAT RAISES A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT QUESTION.


SERGEANT, DID YOU PICK A FIGHT WITH ONE OF VENTURA'S CRYPT SPIDERS?
Nope.
I ASKED THAT QUESTION INCORRECTLY I SHALL REPHRASE MYSELF
TELL ME ABOUT YOUR ACTIVITIES OF THE LAST TWENTY HOURS, STARTING WITH ANYTHING YOU ENJOYED
You senior officers are getting good at crimping all my wiggle room.

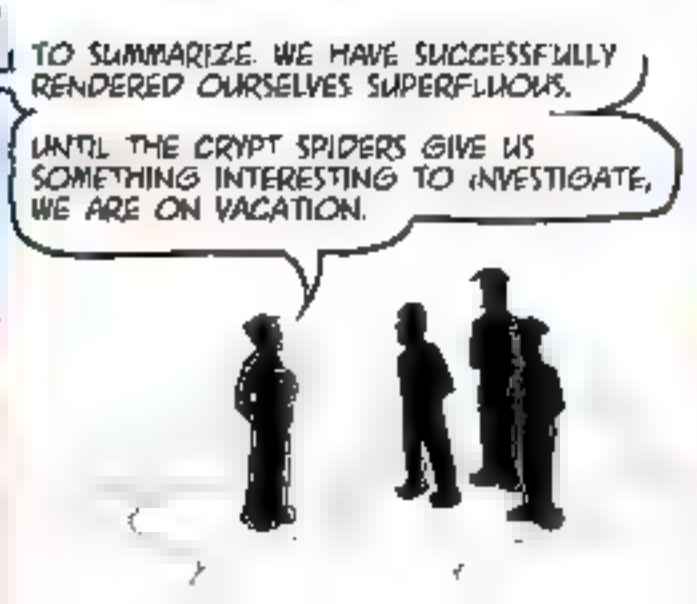
ONE WIGGLE-FREE DEBRIEFING LATER
VENTURA!
SERGEANT SCHLOCK TELLS ME THAT ALL YOUR CRYPT SPIDERS WILL DOUBLE AS BOOTS-ON-THE-GROUND COMBAT DRONES FOR CHINOOK.
IT WAS COMMANDER FOXWORTHY'S IDEA. THIS WAY THEY CAN'T RUN AMOK IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG.
CORPORAL, DID YOU JUST TAKE COVER BEHIND MY GIRLFRIEND?
NO, SHE TOOK COVER BEHIND HER COMMANDING OFFICER.

CAPTAIN. DARLING, DO YOU AND I NEED TO HAVE ANOTHER DISCUSSION ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOUR GIRLFRIEND AND A FELLOW OFFICER?
YOUR FACE IS SAYING "YES BUT I REALLY DON'T WANT TO"
EITHER THAT OR YOUR COMM FEED HAS FROZEN.
THERE'S LOTS OF "FROZEN" HERE.

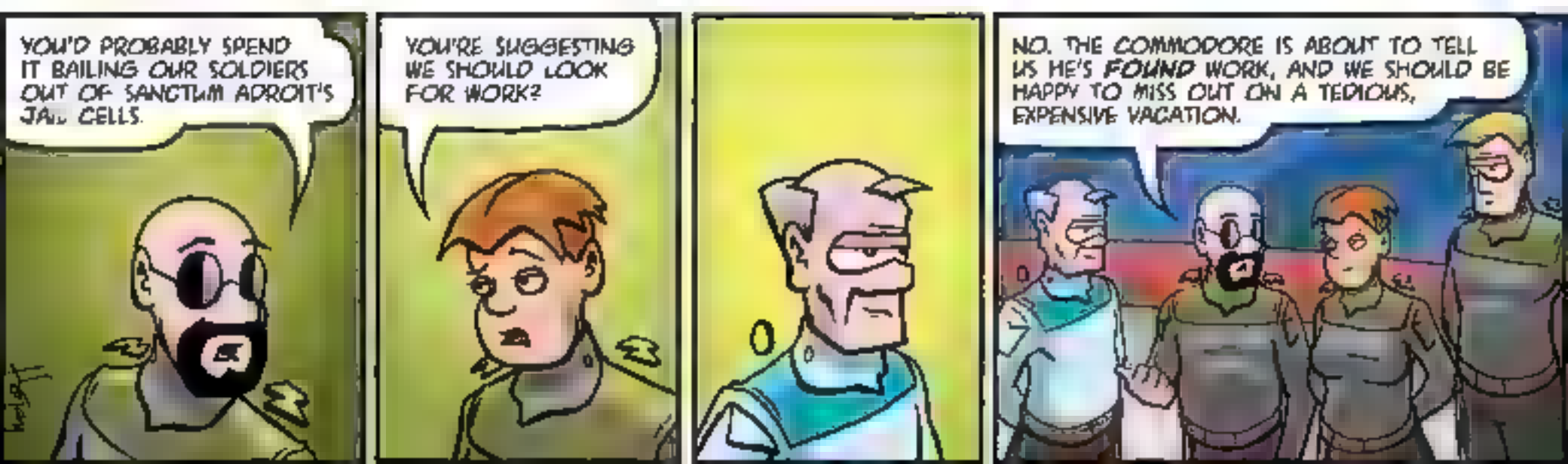

BRIEFING WITH THE COMMODORE
COMMANDER FOXWORTHY HAS PLACED THE CRYPT SPIDERS UNDER CHINOOK'S CONTROL. THESE LIBRARIANS ARE COMBAT-CAPABLE, AND DOUBLE AS A RESERVE CIVIL DEFENSE FORCE.


CHINOOK HAS CREATED A FORMIDABLE DEFENSE NETWORK OUTSIDE THE STATION. WITH HER FLEET OF LONG-GUN CORVETTES SHE CAN FIRE ON AGGRESSIVE INTERLOPERS FAR MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN WE CAN.

MASSEY HAS HIRED SANCTUM ADROIT FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT SERVICES HERE IN JUMPSTAR PRIME. THEY ARRIVE WITH THE FIRST WAVE OF TOURISTS.

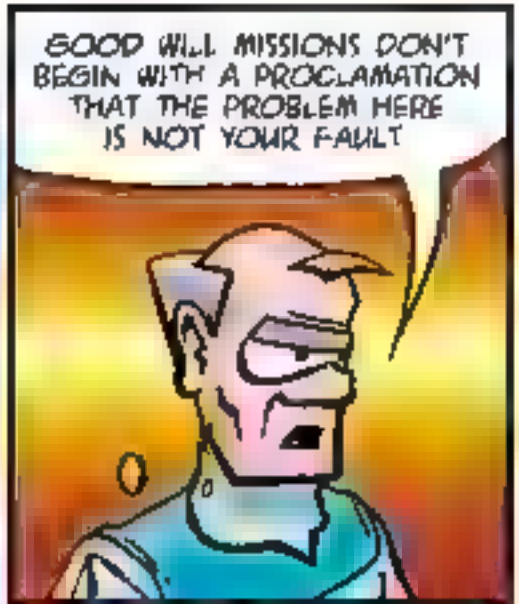

TO SUMMARIZE. WE HAVE SUCCESSFULLY RENDERED OURSELVES SUPERFLUOUS.
UNTIL THE CRYPT SPIDERS GIVE US SOMETHING INTERESTING TO INVESTIGATE, WE ARE ON VACATION.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I'D DO WITH A VACATION.


YOU'D PROBABLY SPEND IT BAILING OUR SOLDIERS OUT OF SANCTUM ADROIT'S JAIL CELLS.
YOU'RE SUGGESTING WE SHOULD LOOK FOR WORK?
NO. THE COMMODORE IS ABOUT TO TELL US HE'S *FOUND* WORK, AND WE SHOULD BE HAPPY TO MISS OUT ON A TEDIOUS, EXPENSIVE VACATION.

WHAT HAVE YOU LINED UP FOR US, COMMODORE?

A GOOD WILL MISSION. REMEMBER THAT BUUTHANDI YOU SHOT UP?
WE DIDN'T SHOOT IT UP A U.N.S. FLEET SHOT IT UP


GOOD WILL MISSIONS DON'T BEGIN WITH A PROCLAMATION THAT THE PROBLEM HERE IS NOT YOUR FAULT

IF THERE'S ENOUGH LEFT OF THAT BUUTHANDI FOR US TO VISIT, THAT MEANS THE U.N.S DID NOT SHOOT IT UP ENOUGH, AND THAT IS VERY MUCH NOT OUR FAULT

THE U.N.S. ATTACK RUPTURED THE BUUTHANDI, TURNING WHAT USED TO BE A BALLOON AROUND A STAR INTO MILLIONS OF SOLAR SAILS.

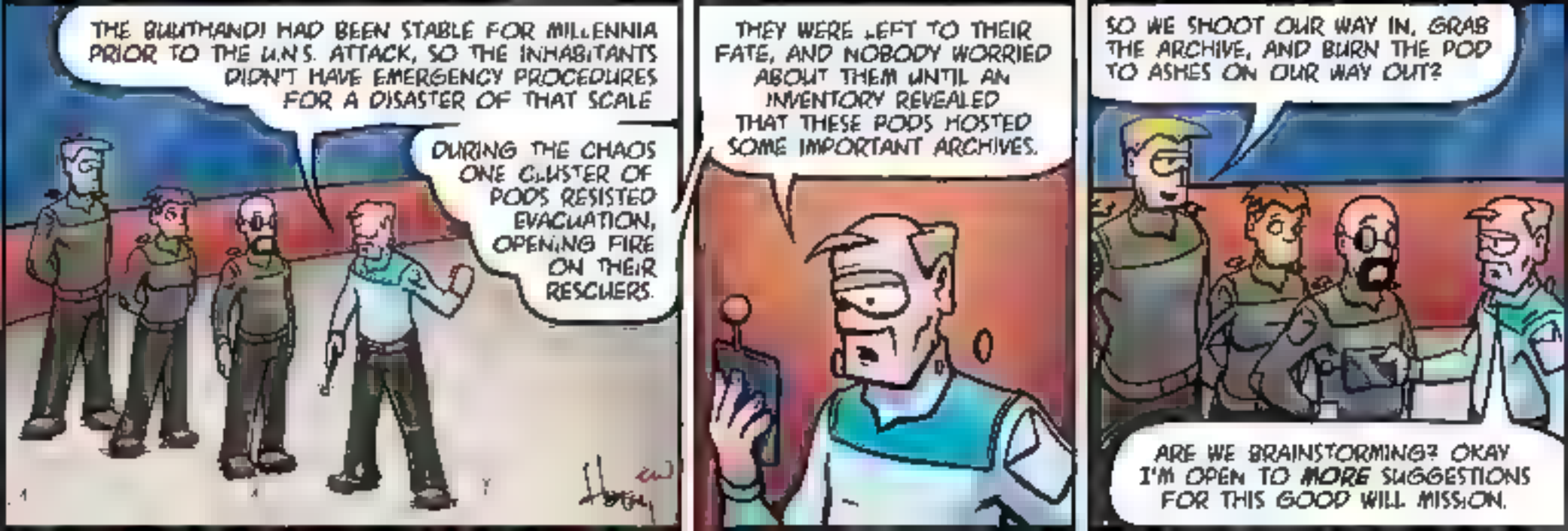
RESCUE MISSIONS WERE LAUNCHED FROM OTHER BUUTHANDI. ALL BUT A TINY FEW OF THE PODS AFFIXED TO THESE SAILS WERE SAFELY EVACUATED

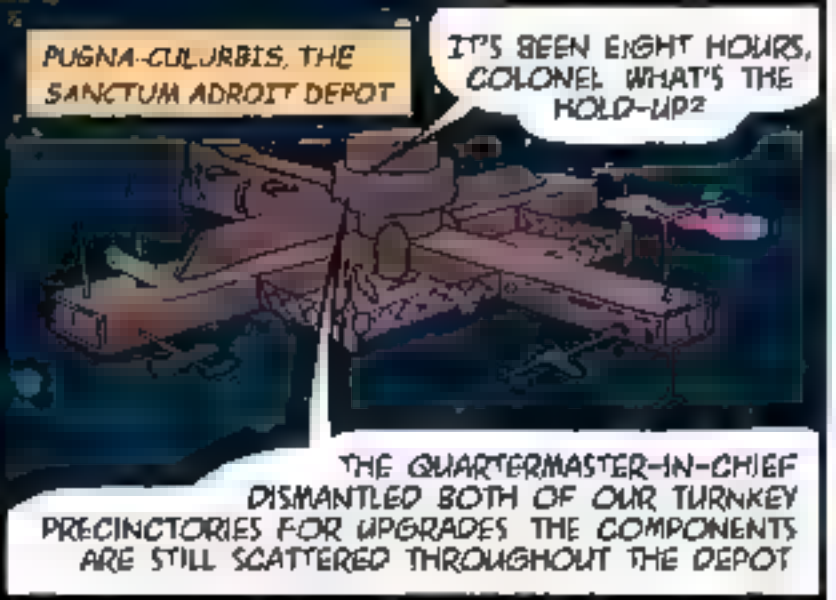
SO WE'RE SUPPOSED TO EVACUATE THE REST OF THEM?

SURE, THAT WOULD BE A **GREAT** SOLUTION. LET'S CALL THAT "PLAN A."

ALSO KNOWN AS "ABLATIVE ARMOR THAT PROBABLY WON'T PROTECT PLAN B."

PLAN B ALWAYS TAKES A BULLET FOR PLAN C. THAT'S WHY THE ALPHABET HAS MORE THAN THREE LETTERS.


THE BUUTHANDI HAD BEEN STABLE FOR MILLENNIA PRIOR TO THE U.N.S. ATTACK, SO THE INHABITANTS DIDN'T HAVE EMERGENCY PROCEDURES FOR A DISASTER OF THAT SCALE
DURING THE CHAOS ONE CLUSTER OF PODS RESISTED EVACUATION, OPENING FIRE ON THEIR RESCUERS.
THEY WERE LEFT TO THEIR FATE, AND NOBODY WORRIED ABOUT THEM UNTIL AN INVENTORY REVEALED THAT THESE PODS HOSTED SOME IMPORTANT ARCHIVES.
SO WE SHOOT OUR WAY IN, GRAB THE ARCHIVE, AND BURN THE POD TO ASHES ON OUR WAY OUT?
ARE WE BRAINSTORMING? OKAY I'M OPEN TO MORE SUGGESTIONS FOR THIS GOOD WILL MISSION.


PUGNA-CULURBIS, THE SANCTUM ADROIT DEPOT
IT'S BEEN EIGHT HOURS, COLONEL WHAT'S THE HOLD-UP?
THE QUARTERMASTER-IN-CHIEF DISMANTLED BOTH OF OUR TURNKEY PRECINCTORIES FOR UPGRADES THE COMPONENTS ARE STILL SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE DEPOT

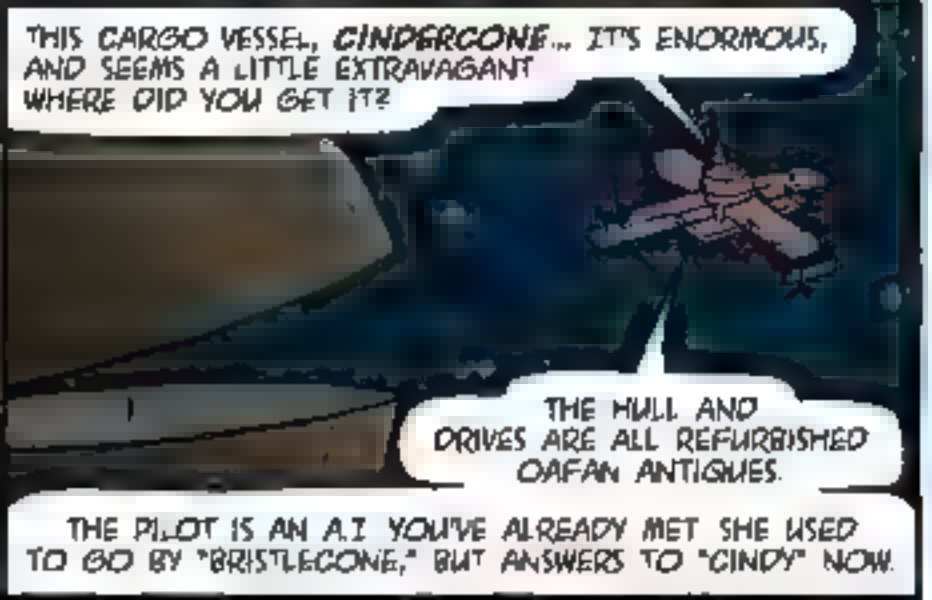
ASSEMBLE IT WHILE WE TRAVEL
THIS IS NOT A MOBILE DEPOT, MISTER REYNSTEIN.

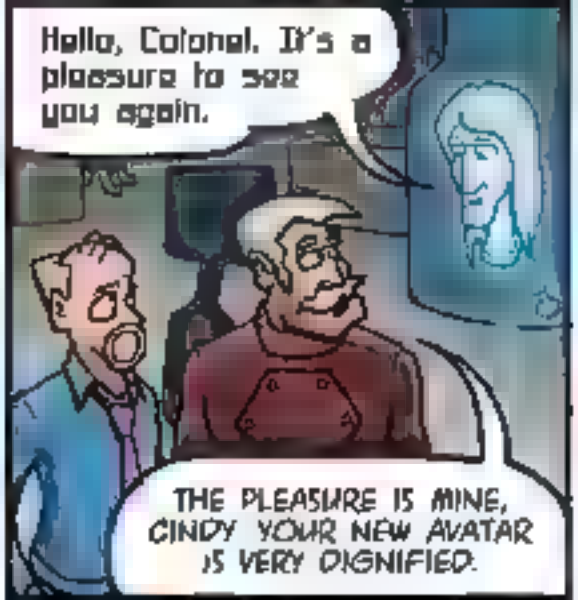
COLONEL, WE'RE TRACKING AN EIGHT-KILOMETER SPHERICAL ARTIFACT ON AN INTERCEPT VECTOR.
CINDERCONE'S LAW: ANYTHING WHOSE LONGEST DIMENSION IS LESS THAN EIGHT KILOMETERS IS MOBILE

THE ROUND-TRIP WILL TAKE TWENTY-TWO HOURS. CAN YOUR DEPOT BE ABSENT FROM THE CELGATE SECTOR FOR THAT LONG?
YOU REALLY DO INTEND TO CARRY OUR ENTIRE DEPOT TO EINA-AFA AND BACK JUST TO SAVE A LITTLE TIME?

HOW MUCH CRIME CAN A CITY OF TWENTY THOUSAND COMMIT DURING EACH HOUR IN WHICH THERE IS ZERO LAW ENFORCEMENT PRESENCE?
OUR UNDERWRITERS HAVE A FORMULA FOR THAT, BUT IT'S COMPLICATED

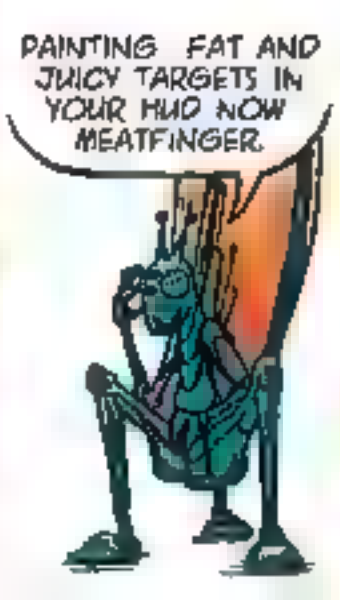
I BELIEVE THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THAT FORMULA VALIDATES MY INTENT
ISSUE AN ALL-COMM, SERGEANT WE'RE GOING TO SPEND A DAY AS CARGO.


THIS CARGO VESSEL, CINDERCONE... IT'S ENORMOUS, AND SEEMS A LITTLE EXTRAVAGANT WHERE DID YOU GET IT?
THE HULL AND DRIVES ARE ALL REFURBISHED OAFAN ANTIQUES.
THE PILOT IS AN A.I YOU'VE ALREADY MET SHE USED TO GO BY "BRISTLECONE," BUT ANSWERS TO "CINDY" NOW.

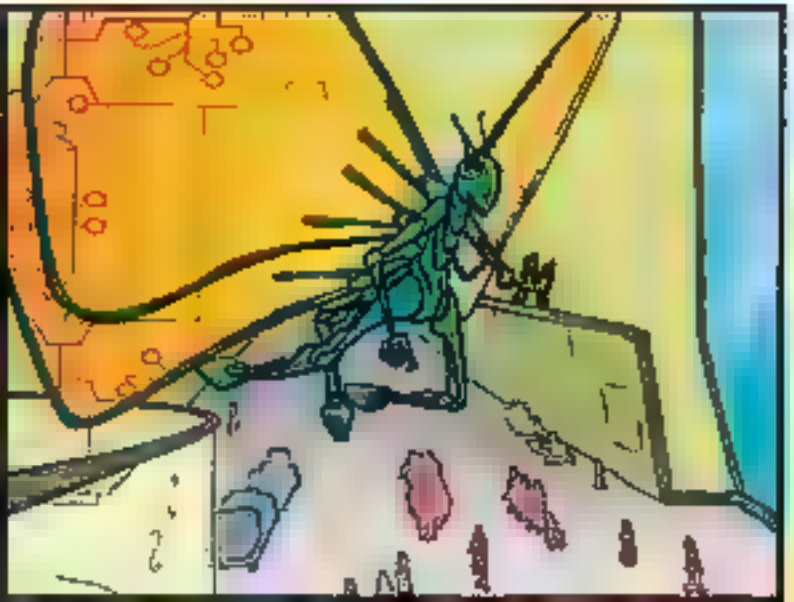

Hello, Colonel. It's a pleasure to see you again.
THE PLEASURE IS MINE, CINDY YOUR NEW AVATAR IS VERY DIGNIFIED.

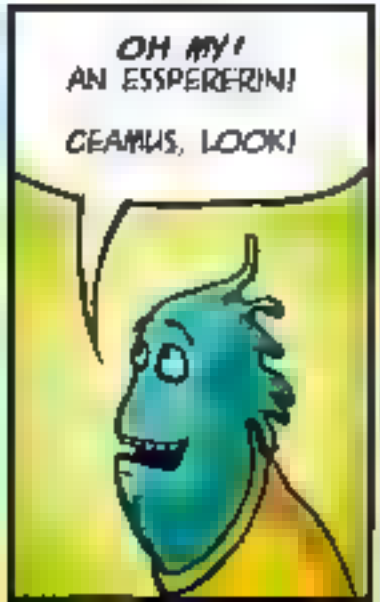
I ASSUME YOU'RE DOING WELL FOR YOURSELF IN THE MERCENARY BUSINESS
Well enough. My hull is worth a million times your company's gross receipts.

JUMPSTAR PRIME WELCOME CENTER
I SEE LOTS OF EASY MARKS, SEPPY
SCAN AGREES. HOW LONG DO YOU THINK THIS WILL LAST?
CONCOURSE B
LONG ENOUGH FOR A HAUL OF FAT WALLETS AND JUICY HANDBRAINS. LET'S BEGIN.

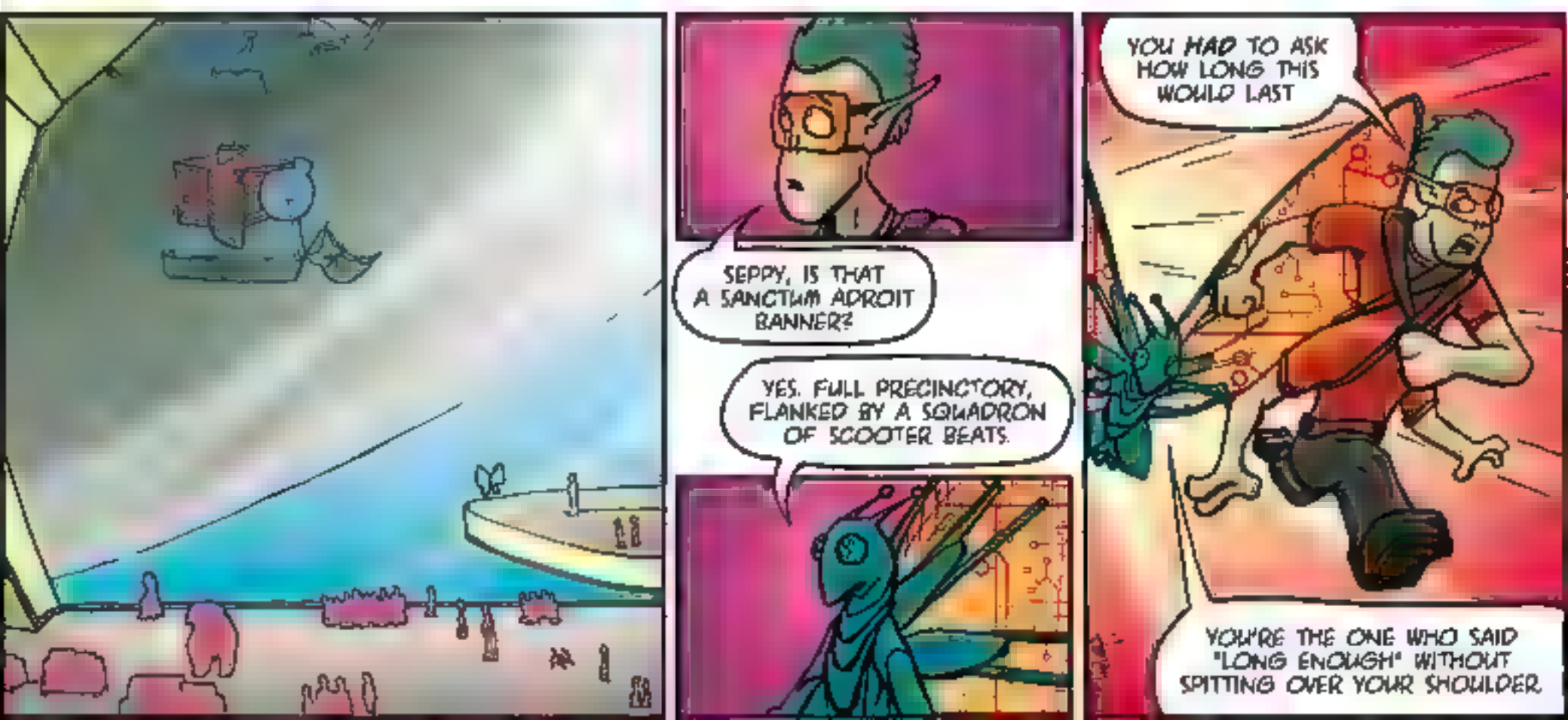

PAINTING FAT AND JUICY TARGETS IN YOUR HUD NOW MEATFINGER.

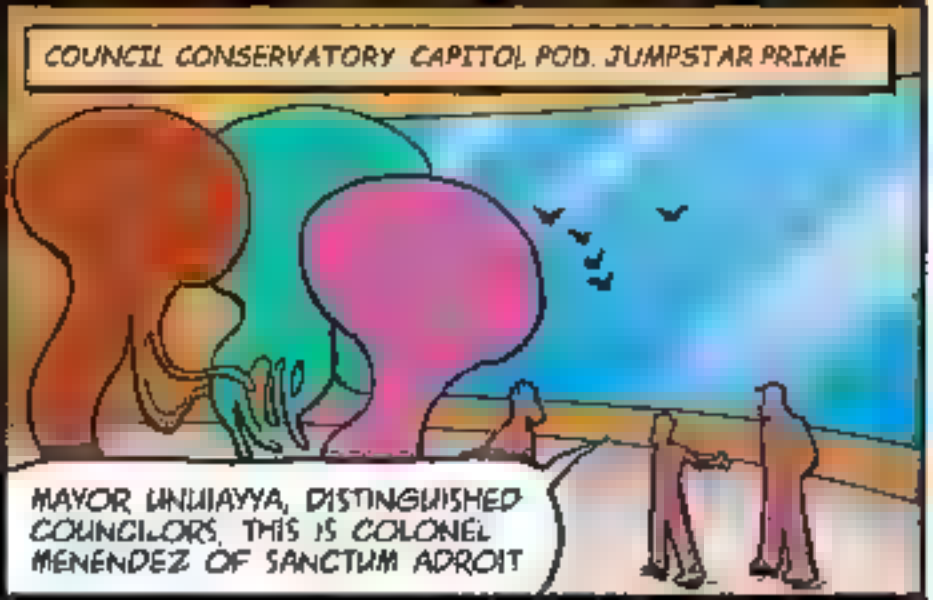
I'LL HIT THE LOOKY-LOOS FIRST. GO SPREAD YOUR WINGS BY THE RAIL.




OH MY!
AN ESSPEREFIN!
CEAMUS, LOOK!

LOOK BEHIND IT! I'VE NEVER SEEN A CARGO SHIP THAT SIZE!


SEPPY, IS THAT A SANCTUM APROIT BANNER?
YES. FULL PRECINCTORY, FLANKED BY A SQUADRON OF SCOOTER BEATS.
YOU HAD TO ASK HOW LONG THIS WOULD LAST
YOU'RE THE ONE WHO SAID "LONG ENOUGH" WITHOUT SPITTING OVER YOUR SHOULDER.

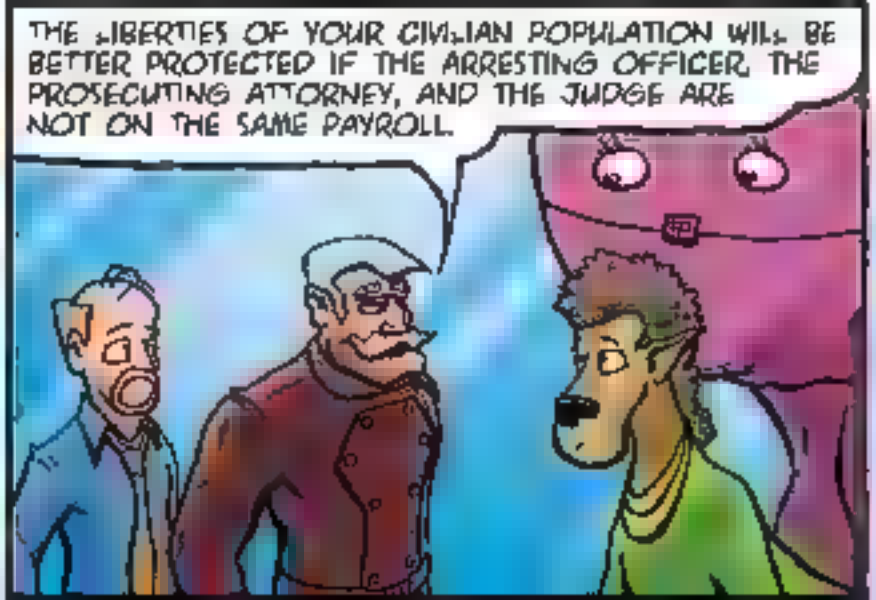

COUNCIL CONSERVATORY CAPITOL POD. JUMPSTAR PRIME
MAYOR UNUIAYYA, DISTINGUISHED COUNCILORS, THIS IS COLONEL MENENDEZ OF SANCTUM ADROIT

WELCOME, COLONEL. HOW QUICKLY WILL YOU BE READY TO "FIGHT CRIME" HERE IN OUR SHINY NEW CITY?

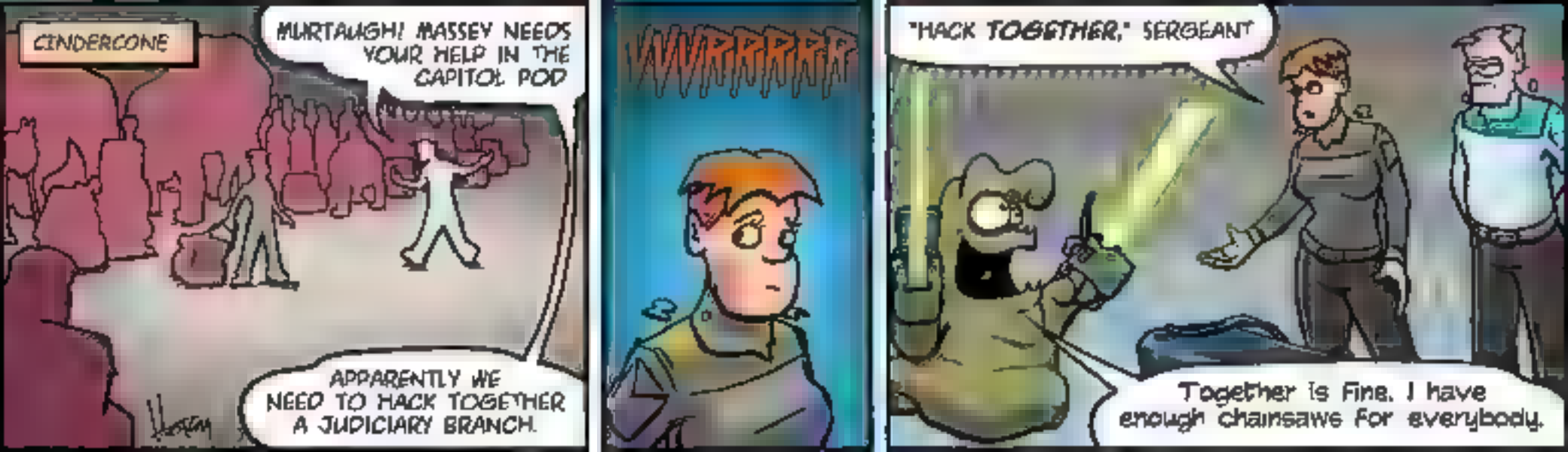
WE HAVEN'T DEPLOYED OUR CAPE-AND-LEOTARD BRIGADE YET, BUT THE CRIME FIGHTING HAS ALREADY BEGUN.

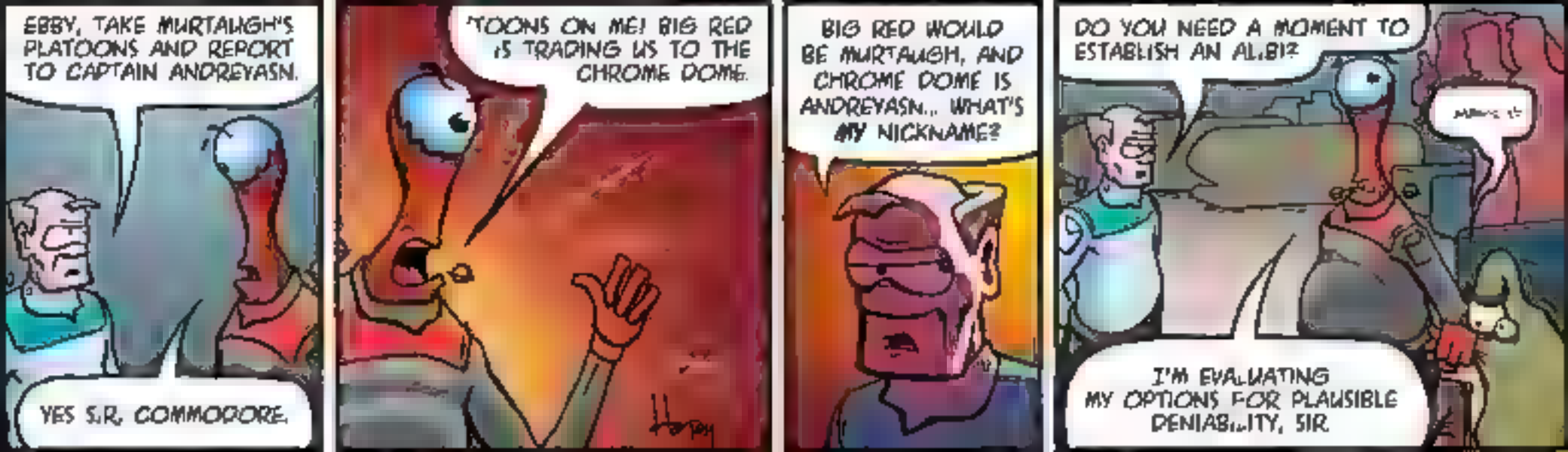
WE CRUNCHED THE PUBLIC SURVEILLANCE TAKEN DURING OUR PRECINTORY'S ARRIVAL. THE RESULTS WERE ENLIGHTENING.
OF THE THREE THOUSAND INDIVIDUALS SURVEILLED, SIXTEEN SHOWED DISMAY ONCE THE SANCTUM ADROIT FLAG WAS VISIBLE.
ELEVEN OF THOSE SIXTEEN INDIVIDUALS DISCREETLY FLED PUBLIC VIEW. EIGHT OF THE ELEVEN HAVE ALREADY LEFT GINA-AFA.
YOU ASKED IF WE'RE READY TO FIGHT CRIME? GLIB ANSWERS ASIDE, WE'VE ALREADY BEGUN, AND WE APPEAR TO BE WINNING

THE ORDINANCES YOU'VE LAID OUT FOR ENFORCEMENT ARE GOOD, BUT YOU DON'T APPEAR TO HAVE A JUDICIARY IN PLACE YET
AH. WE THOUGHT THAT WAS SOMETHING YOU WOULD HANDLE

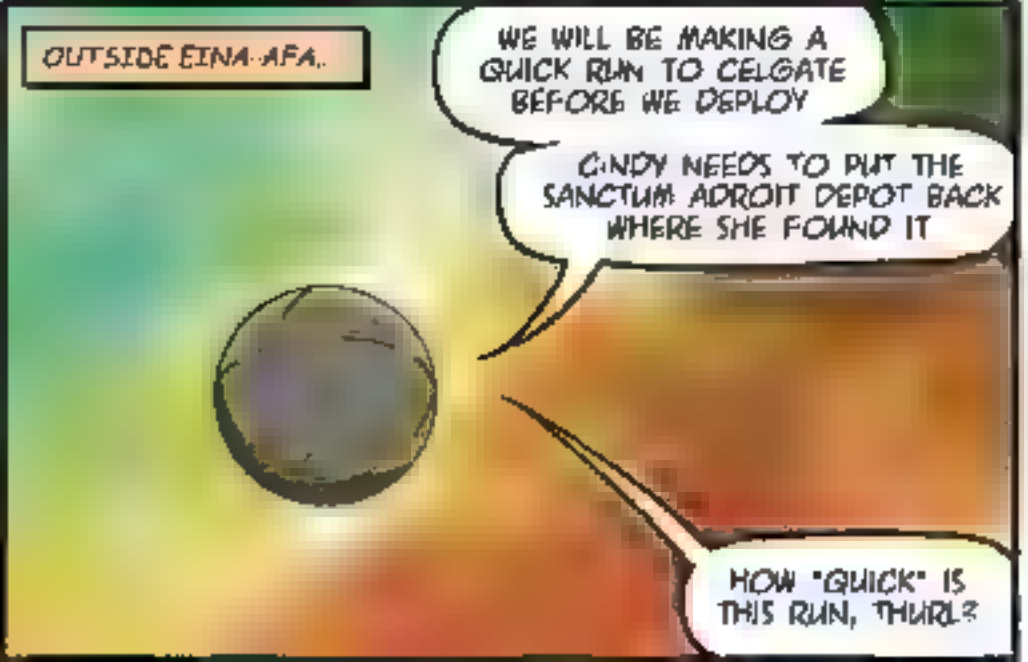

THE LIBERTIES OF YOUR CIVILIAN POPULATION WILL BE BETTER PROTECTED IF THE ARRESTING OFFICER, THE PROSECUTING ATTORNEY, AND THE JUDGE ARE NOT ON THE SAME PAYROLL.

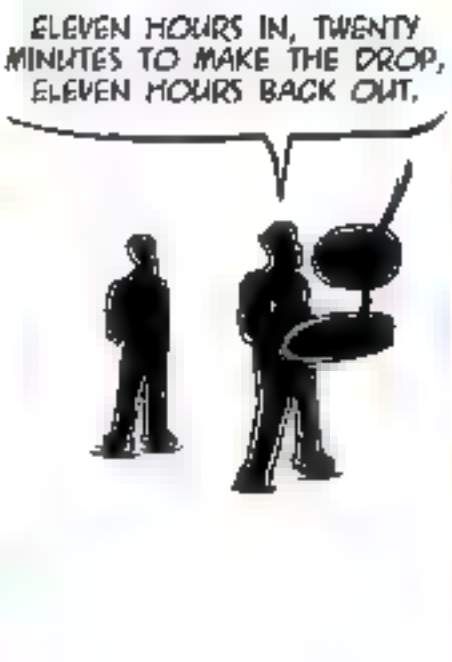
ALSO, WE LOST THE SERVICES OF THE PARTNERSHIP COLLECTIVE ONCE WE BEGAN HUNTING THEIR ATTORNEY DRONES FOR BOUNTIES.


CINDERCONE
MURTAUGH! MASSEY NEEDS YOUR HELP IN THE CAPITOL POD
APPARENTLY WE NEED TO HACK TOGETHER A JUDICIARY BRANCH.
VVRRRRRR
"HACK TOGETHER," SERGEANT
Together is fine. I have enough chainsaws for everybody.

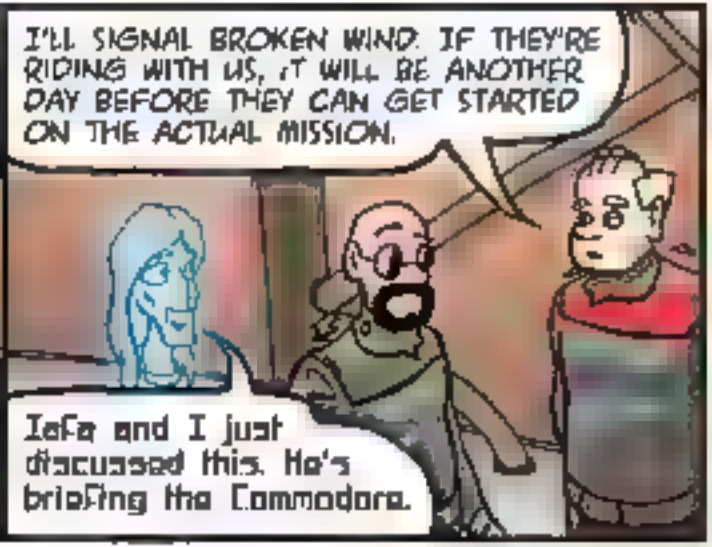

EBBY, TAKE MURTAUGH'S PLATOONS AND REPORT TO CAPTAIN ANDREYASN.
YES SIR, COMMODORE.
TOONS ON ME! BIG RED IS TRADING US TO THE CHROME DOME.
BIG RED WOULD BE MURTAUGH, AND CHROME DOME IS ANDREYASN... WHAT'S MY NICKNAME?
DO YOU NEED A MOMENT TO ESTABLISH AN ALIBI?
I'M EVALUATING MY OPTIONS FOR PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY, SIR.

MAKE A HOLE FOR ME, CORPORAL.
STRAIGHT AHEAD, CAPTAIN. DO YOU NEED A LIFT BACK TO THE CITY?
NO THANK YOU, CORPORAL. I CAN FALL ALL THE WAY THERE WITHOUT ANY HELP
I DON'T GET TO DEPLOY OUT, SO I MIGHT AS WELL DEPLOY BACK.


OUTSIDE EINA-AFA..
WE WILL BE MAKING A QUICK RUN TO CELGATE BEFORE WE DEPLOY
CINDY NEEDS TO PUT THE SANCTUM ADROIT DEPOT BACK WHERE SHE FOUND IT
HOW "QUICK" IS THIS RUN, THURL?

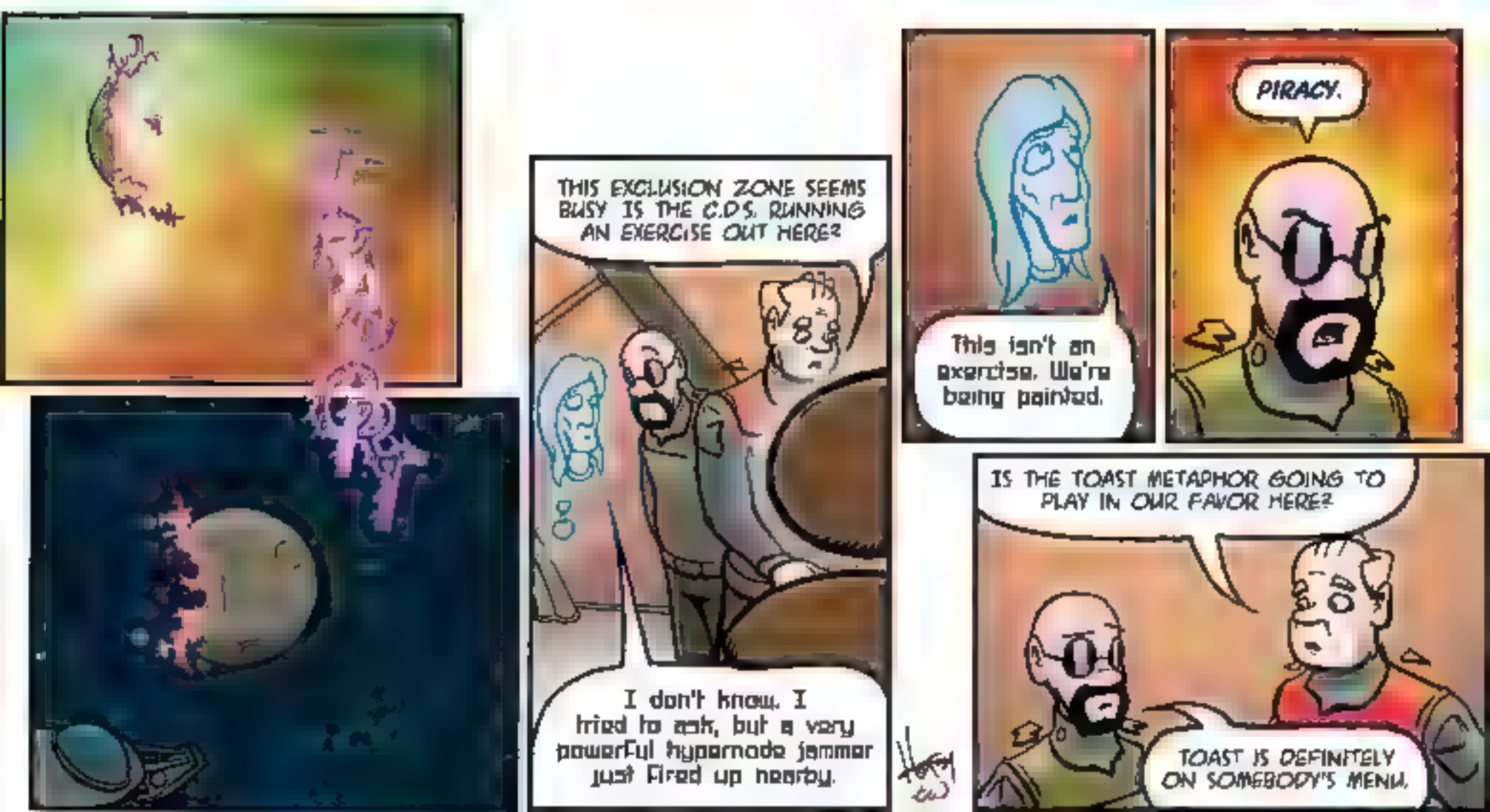

ELEVEN HOURS IN, TWENTY MINUTES TO MAKE THE DROP, ELEVEN HOURS BACK OUT.

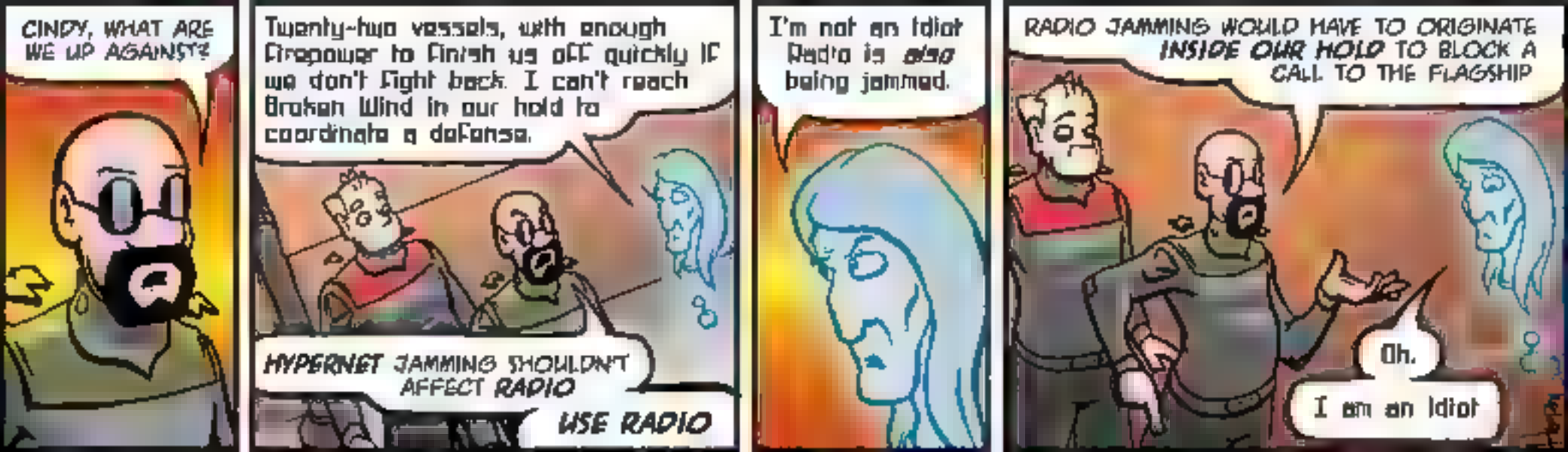
SO... "QUICK" LIKE SPACE TRAVEL, NOT "QUICK" LIKE TOAST

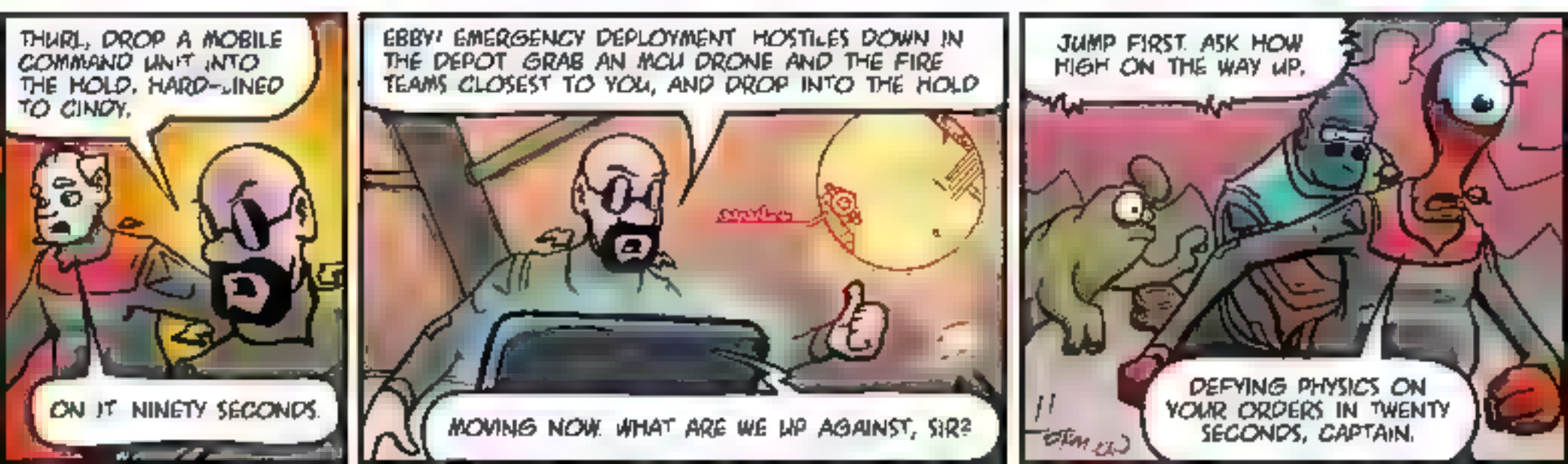

I'LL SIGNAL BROKEN WIND. IF THEY'RE RIDING WITH US, IT WILL BE ANOTHER DAY BEFORE THEY CAN GET STARTED ON THE ACTUAL MISSION.
Iefa and I just discussed this. He's briefing the Commodore.

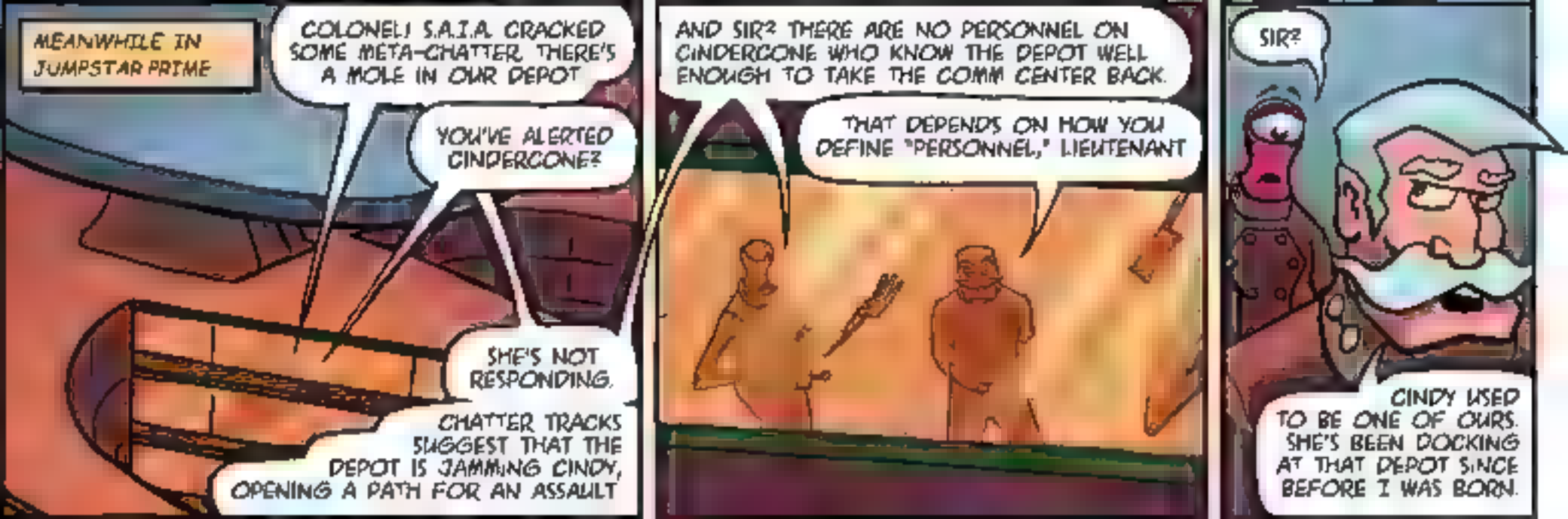
The Commodore says they'll ride along and keep us company.

THAT WAS QUICK LIKE TOAST LET'S GO.


THIS EXCLUSION ZONE SEEMS BUSY IS THE C.D.S. RUNNING AN EXERCISE OUT HERE?
I don't know. I tried to ask, but a very powerful hypernode jammer just fired up nearby.
This isn't an exercise. We're being painted.
PIRACY.
IS THE TOAST METAPHOR GOING TO PLAY IN OUR FAVOR HERE?
TOAST IS DEFINITELY ON SOMEBODY'S MENU.


CINDY, WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?
Twenty-two vessels, with enough firepower to finish us off quickly if we don't fight back. I can't reach Broken Wind in our hold to coordinate a defense.
HYPERNET JAMMING SHOULDN'T AFFECT RADIO
USE RADIO
I'm not an idiot Radio is also being jammed.
RADIO JAMMING WOULD HAVE TO ORIGINATE INSIDE OUR HOLD TO BLOCK A CALL TO THE FLAGSHIP
Oh.
I am an idiot


THURL, DROP A MOBILE COMMAND UNIT INTO THE HOLD. HARD-LINED TO CINDY.
ON IT. NINETY SECONDS.
EBBY! EMERGENCY DEPLOYMENT. HOSTILES DOWN IN THE DEPOT. GRAB AN MCU DRONE AND THE FIRE TEAMS CLOSEST TO YOU, AND DROP INTO THE HOLD.
MOVING NOW. WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST, SIR?
JUMP FIRST. ASK HOW HIGH ON THE WAY UP.
DEFYING PHYSICS ON YOUR ORDERS IN TWENTY SECONDS, CAPTAIN.


MEANWHILE IN JUMPSTAR PRIME
COLONEL! S.A.I.A. CRACKED SOME META-CHATTER. THERE'S A MOLE IN OUR DEPOT.
YOU'VE ALERTED CINDERCONE?
SHE'S NOT RESPONDING.
CHATTER TRACKS SUGGEST THAT THE DEPOT IS JAMMING CINDY, OPENING A PATH FOR AN ASSAULT.
AND SIR? THERE ARE NO PERSONNEL ON CINDERCONE WHO KNOW THE DEPOT WELL ENOUGH TO TAKE THE COMM CENTER BACK.
THAT DEPENDS ON HOW YOU DEFINE "PERSONNEL," LIEUTENANT.
SIR?
CINDY USED TO BE ONE OF OURS. SHE'S BEEN DOCKING AT THAT DEPOT SINCE BEFORE I WAS BORN.

THE WARSHIP BROKEN WIND, WITHIN CINDERCONE'S COMM-JAMMED HOLD

Boots away, Captain.

The jamming is definitely coming from the depot. I still can't reach Cindercone.

CAN YOU PINPOINT THE SOURCE OF THE JAMMING?

Multiple transmitters, sir. If there's a master control node, I can't find it.

I can open fire on the depot and keep shooting until the noise goes away.

DROP THE SARCASM. YOU'VE WORKED WITH US LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT THE "KILL IT WITH ALL THE FIRE" OPTION IS ALWAYS ON THE TABLE.

Cindy just dropped a mobile command unit into the hold.
YES!
LOCK LASERS WITH THAT AND TELL ME WHAT IS GOING ON.
Way ahead of you, sir
Hello, Captain Tagon.
We have a situation, and we have a plan.
IS IT A GOOD PLAN?
"The plan's principals seem happy with it"

INTERLOCK ESTABLISHED! I'M LIVE WITH CINDY'S INTEL, IAFA'S EYES, AND WE CAN RUSH THE DEPOT USING MOVING CARGO BAFFLES AS COVER.
GOOD WORK CORPORAL. WHAT'S THE SITUATION OUTSIDE?
CINDY WON'T SAY BUT I CAN HEAR CAPTAIN ANDREYASN SCREAMING POINTY THINGS IN THE BACKGROUND
POINTY?
"AH. POINT DEFENSES. HE'S COMPLAINING ABOUT THEM."

This is a "Harmless Sparrow" from Daysun Tingo in Daehra. Hull markings suggest it belongs to Bengen Reif, a merchanter of ill repute.

These Doblitz Harmadillo-class assault boats belong to an Ustreben scion. They aren't built for ship-to-ship combat, but they'll give us plenty of trouble if our hold is breached.

This used to be the destroyer Gonzhuto, Celestchyl Orbital Foundries. It was surplussed thirty years ago, and has been linked to pirate activity near Oth.

This is a Baltsta-class destroyer from Aguirre Galactic in Sol System. No call sign, provenance unknown.
It has deployed a half cohort of Gladius-class fighters. I hope that's all it brought.

Hanging back, a Fox and Young Orion-class cruiser positively identified as a privateer from Oshka Kree in the Perari Ring.

I can see it, so they're either using it wrong, or planning something weird.

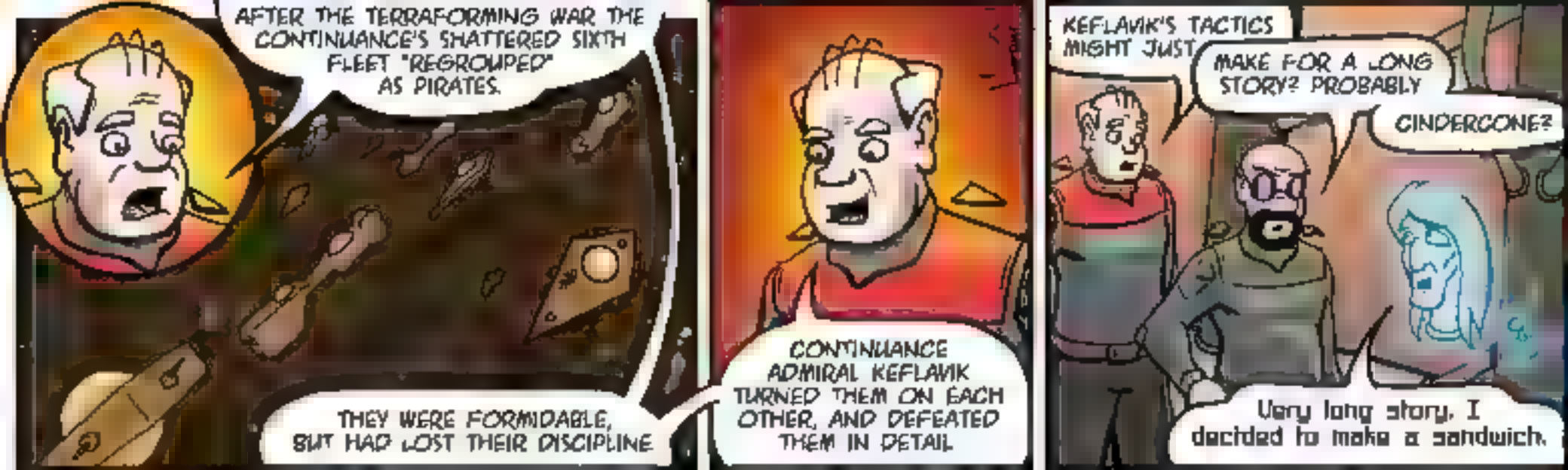
WHY AREN'T WE ALREADY DEAD?

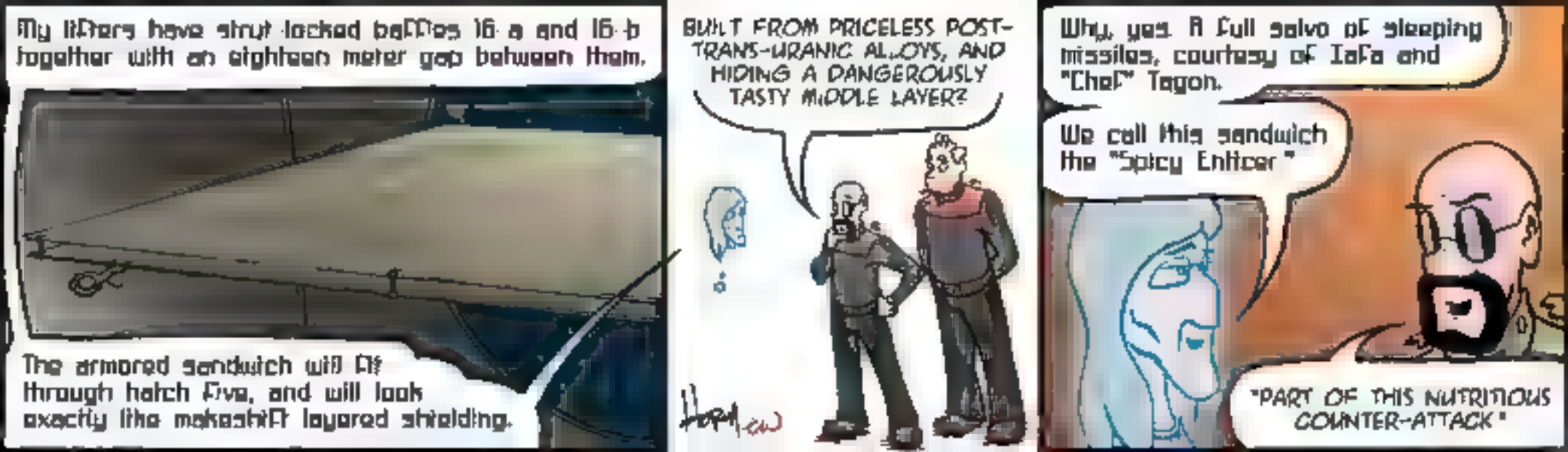
BECAUSE THIS ISN'T A PIRATE FLEET

IT'S A LOOSE CONFEDERACY OF OPPORTUNISTS.

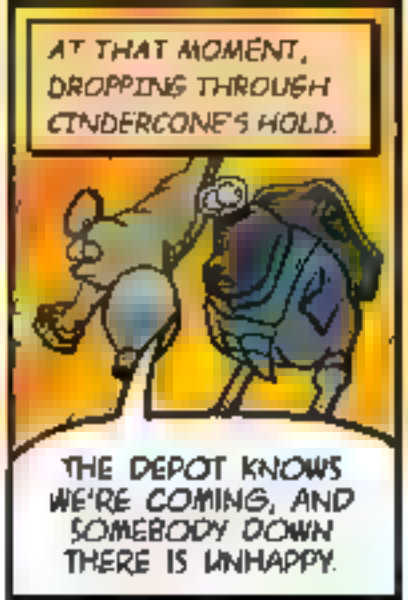
I was going to say "because I'm pretty good at this."

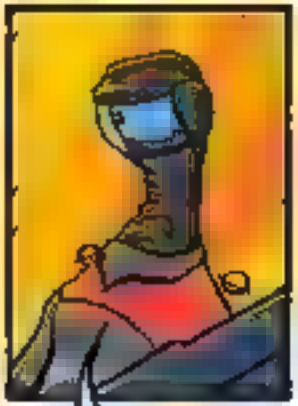
YOU'RE *VERY* GOOD AT THIS, BUT THURL'S ANSWER MEANS YOU'RE ABOUT TO TAKE YOUR GAME UP A NOTCH.

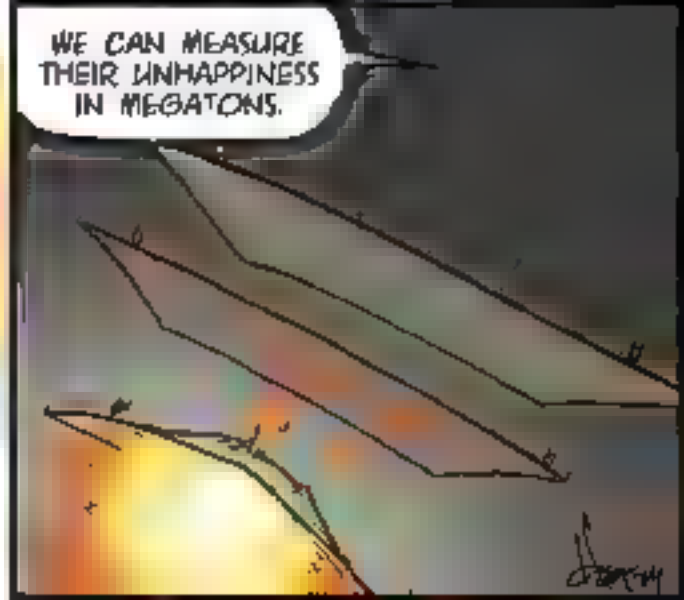

AFTER THE TERRAFORMING WAR THE CONTINUANCE'S SHATTERED SIXTH FLEET "REGROUPED" AS PIRATES.
THEY WERE FORMIDABLE, BUT HAD LOST THEIR DISCIPLINE
CONTINUANCE ADMIRAL KEFLAVIK TURNED THEM ON EACH OTHER, AND DEFEATED THEM IN DETAIL
KEFLAVIK'S TACTICS MIGHT JUST
MAKE FOR A LONG STORY? PROBABLY
CINDERCONE?
Very long story. I decided to make a sandwich.

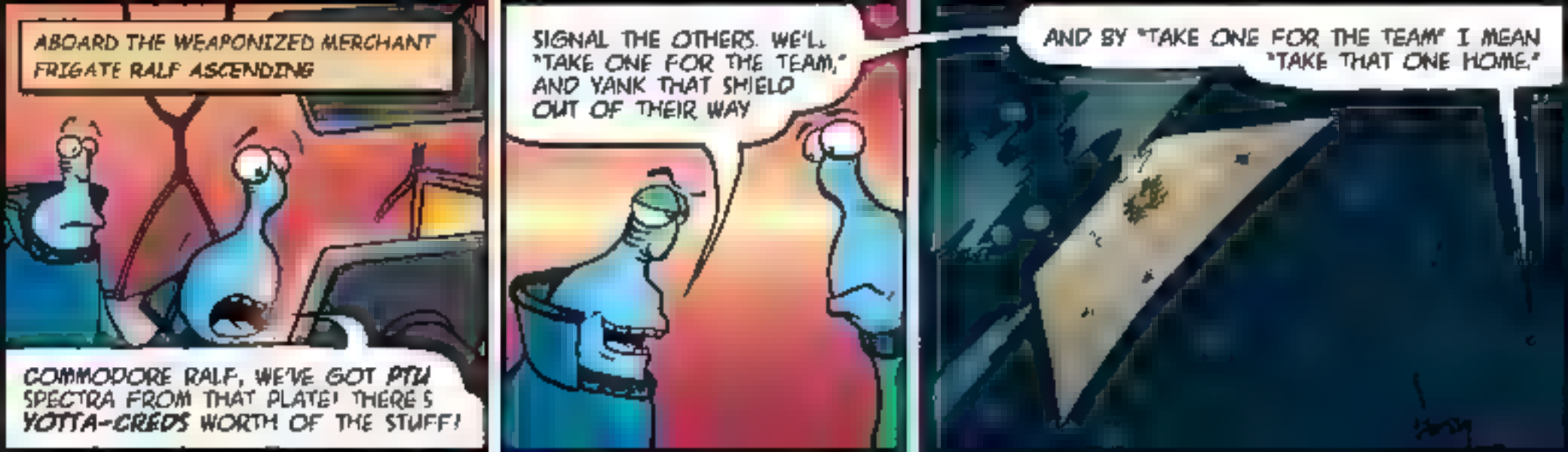

My lifters have strut-locked baffles 16-a and 16-b together with an eighteen meter gap between them.
The armored sandwich will fit through hatch five, and will look exactly like makeshift layered shielding.
BUILT FROM PRICELESS POST-TRANS-URANIC ALLOYS, AND HIDING A DANGEROUSLY TASTY MIDDLE LAYER?
Why, yes. A full salvo of sleeping missiles, courtesy of Ia'fa and "Chef" Tagon.
We call this sandwich the "Spicy Enticer."
"PART OF THIS NUTRITIOUS COUNTER-ATTACK."

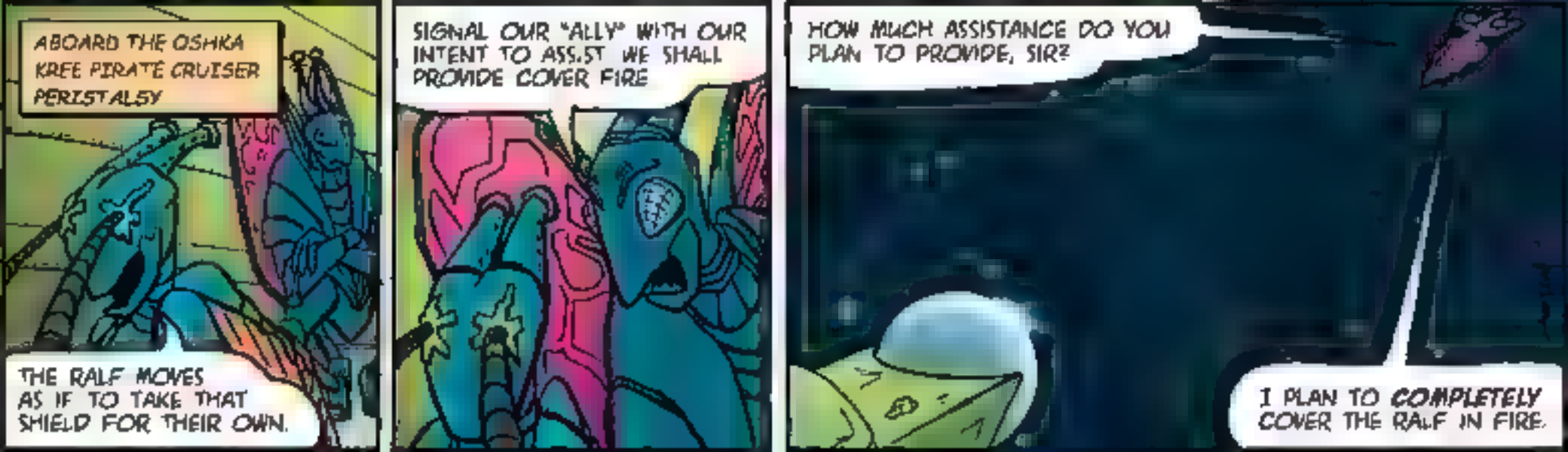
CAPTAIN, DO YOU THINK THESE PIRATES WILL REALLY BELIEVE WE'RE THROWING AWAY PRICELESS PTU BAFFLES AS ABLATIVE SHIELDS?
IF THEY'RE TALKING TO THE DEPOT, THEY'LL HEAR EBBY'S TEAM SET A RATHER CONVINCING PRECEDENT

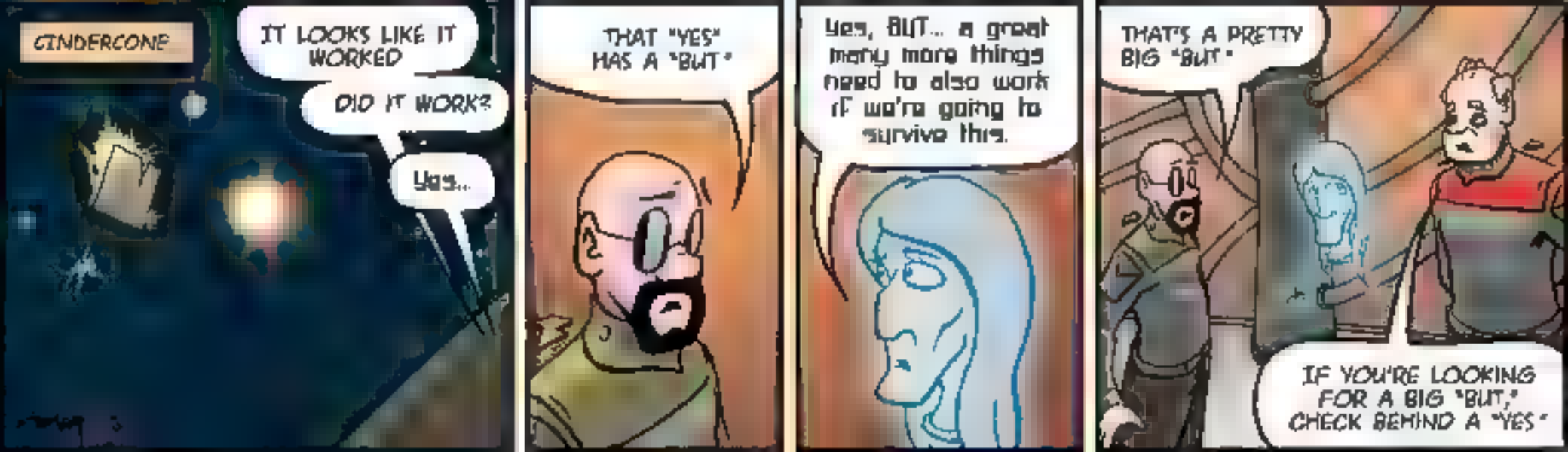

AT THAT MOMENT, DROPPING THROUGH CINDERCONE'S HOLD.
THE DEPOT KNOWS WE'RE COMING, AND SOMEBODY DOWN THERE IS UNHAPPY.

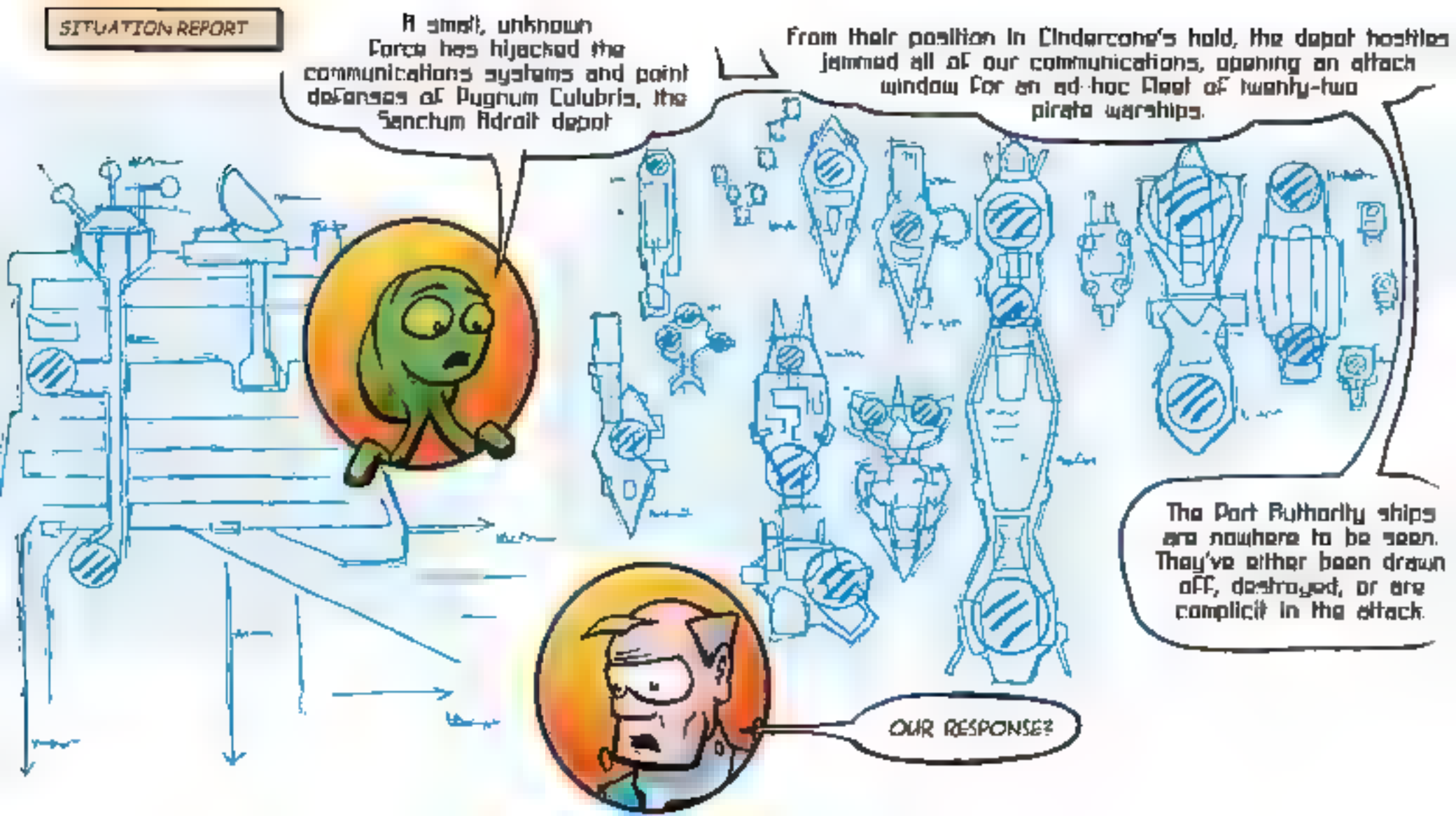

HOW UNHAPPY?


WE CAN MEASURE THEIR UNHAPPINESS IN MEGATONS.


ABOARD THE WEAPONIZED MERCHANT FRIGATE RALF ASCENDING
COMMODORE RALF, WE'VE GOT PTU SPECTRA FROM THAT PLATE! THERE'S YOTTA-CREDS WORTH OF THE STUFF!
SIGNAL THE OTHERS. WE'LL "TAKE ONE FOR THE TEAM," AND YANK THAT SHIELD OUT OF THEIR WAY
AND BY "TAKE ONE FOR THE TEAM" I MEAN "TAKE THAT ONE HOME."


ABOARD THE OSHKA KREE PIRATE CRUISER PERISTALSY
THE RALF MOVES AS IF TO TAKE THAT SHIELD FOR THEIR OWN.
SIGNAL OUR "ALLY" WITH OUR INTENT TO ASSIST WE SHALL PROVIDE COVER FIRE
HOW MUCH ASSISTANCE DO YOU PLAN TO PROVIDE, SIR?
I PLAN TO COMPLETELY COVER THE RALF IN FIRE.


CINDERCONE
IT LOOKS LIKE IT WORKED
DID IT WORK?
Yes...
THAT "YES" HAS A "BUT"
Yes, BUT... a great many more things need to also work if we're going to survive this.
THAT'S A PRETTY BIG "BUT"
IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A BIG "BUT," CHECK BEHIND A "YES"


SITUATION REPORT
A small, unknown Force has hijacked the communications systems and point defenses of Pugnum Culubris, the Senchym Adroit depot
From their position in Cindercone's hold, the depot hostiles jammed all of our communications, opening an attack window for an ad-hoc fleet of twenty-two pirate warships.
The Port Authority ships are nowhere to be seen. They've either been drawn off, destroyed, or are complicit in the attack.
OUR RESPONSE?

We established a line-of-sight communication network. Commander Ebbirnath is dropping through the hold, and will assault the depot's communications center with a platoon of Toughs.

Cindy is shielding Ebby's platoon from the depot's point defenses with cargo baffles. Shots have been fired.

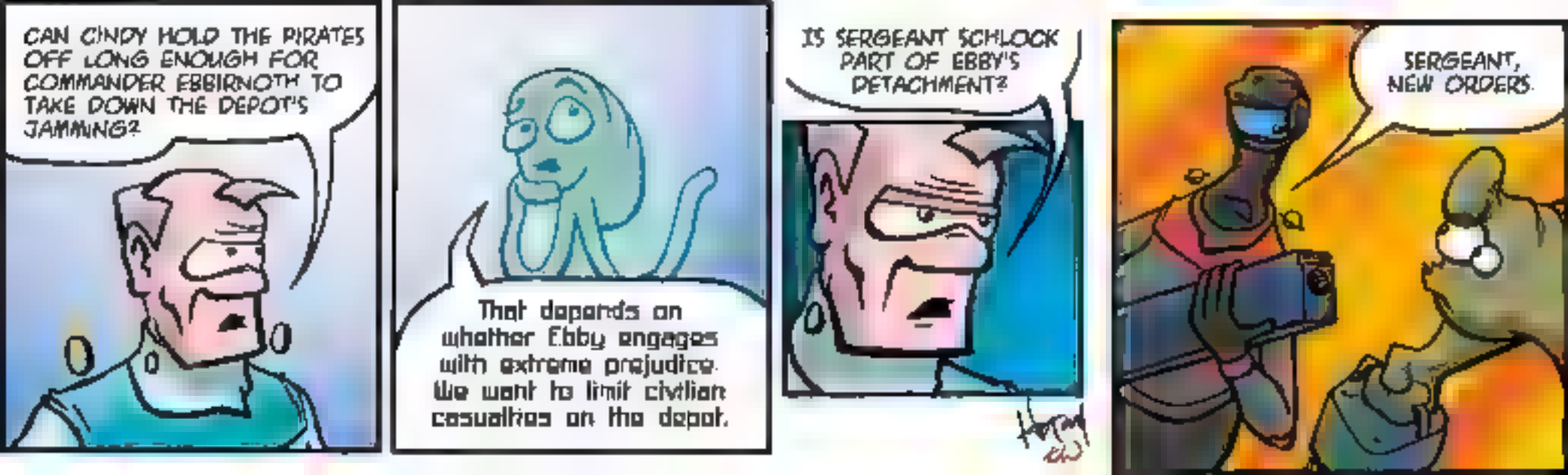
Cindy threw some of those very expensive baffles through hatch five, successfully stringing out our attackers, who are quite undisciplined. Two pirate vessels were destroyed fighting over the prize.

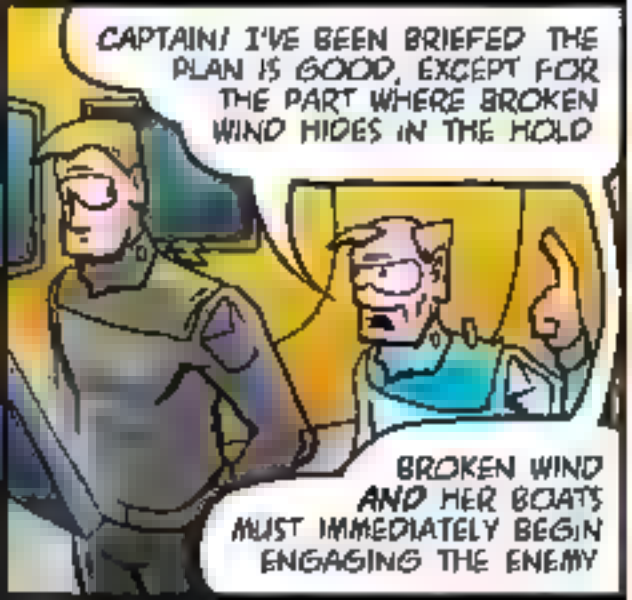
The remaining pirates are not yet strung out enough for us to execute defeat-in-detail. The Broken Wind is more than a match for any three of those warships, but there are twenty of them.

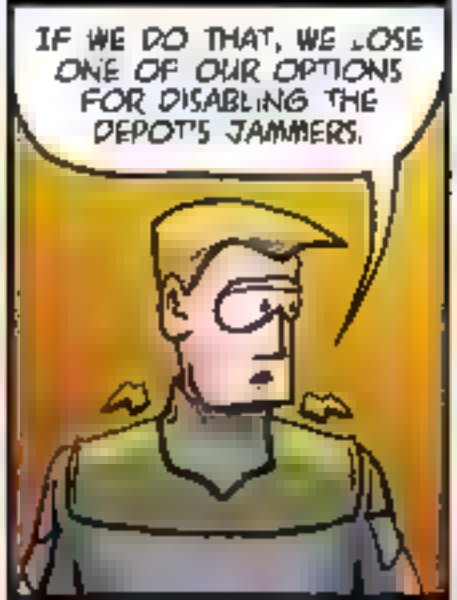
Once Ebby's team has shut down the jamming we can call Chinook and get long-gun support. The pirate fleet will be disabled seconds later.

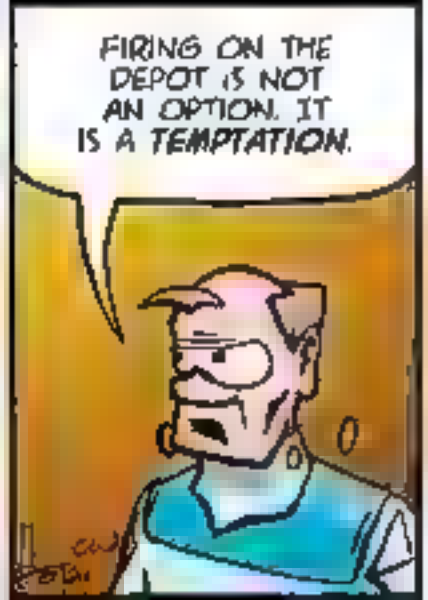
JUST "DISABLED?"

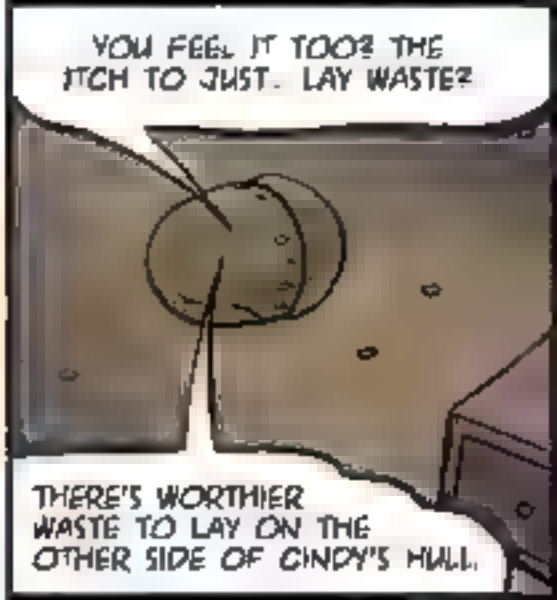
Your son cited Maxim I, and said, and I quote: "If we disintegrate them we lose the ability to take all their stuff."

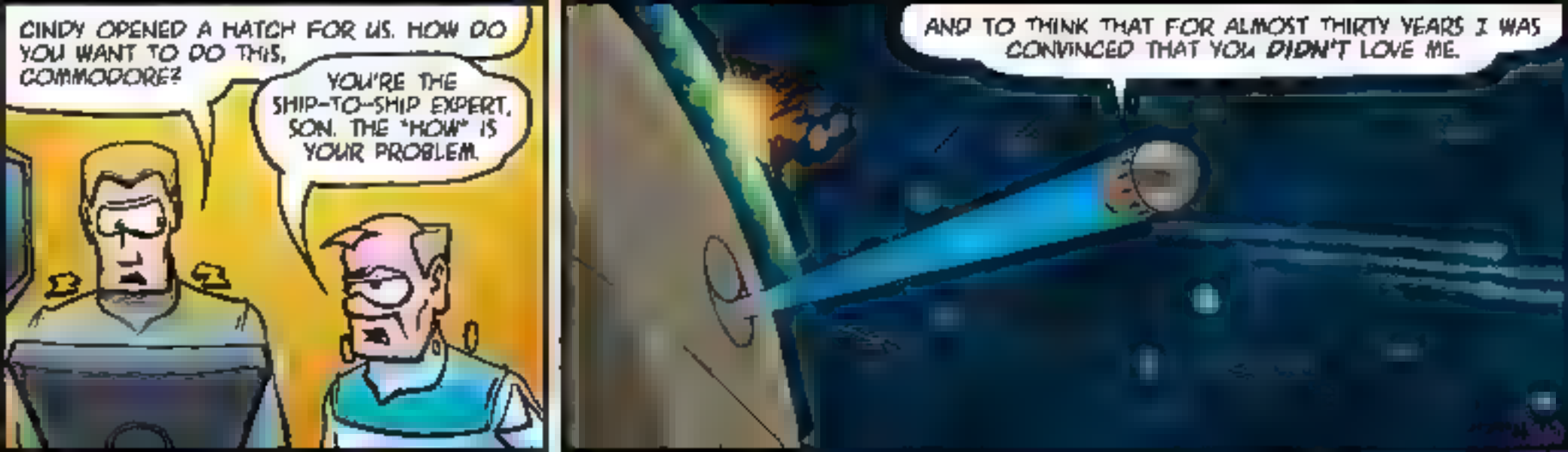

CAN CINDY HOLD THE PIRATES OFF LONG ENOUGH FOR COMMANDER EBBIRNOTH TO TAKE DOWN THE DEPOT'S JAMMING?
That depends on whether Ebby engages with extreme prejudice. We want to limit civilian casualties on the depot.
IS SERGEANT SCHLOCK PART OF EBBY'S DETACHMENT?
SERGEANT, NEW ORDERS.

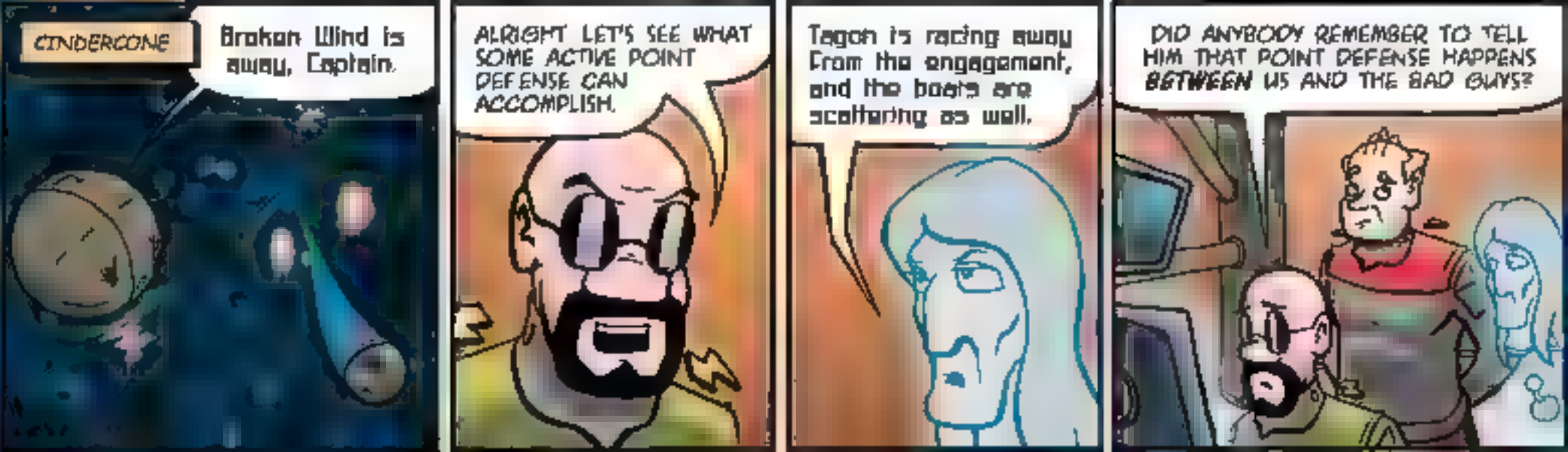

CAPTAIN! I'VE BEEN BRIEFED THE PLAN IS GOOD, EXCEPT FOR THE PART WHERE BROKEN WIND HIDES IN THE HOLD
BROKEN WIND AND HER BOATS MUST IMMEDIATELY BEGIN ENGAGING THE ENEMY

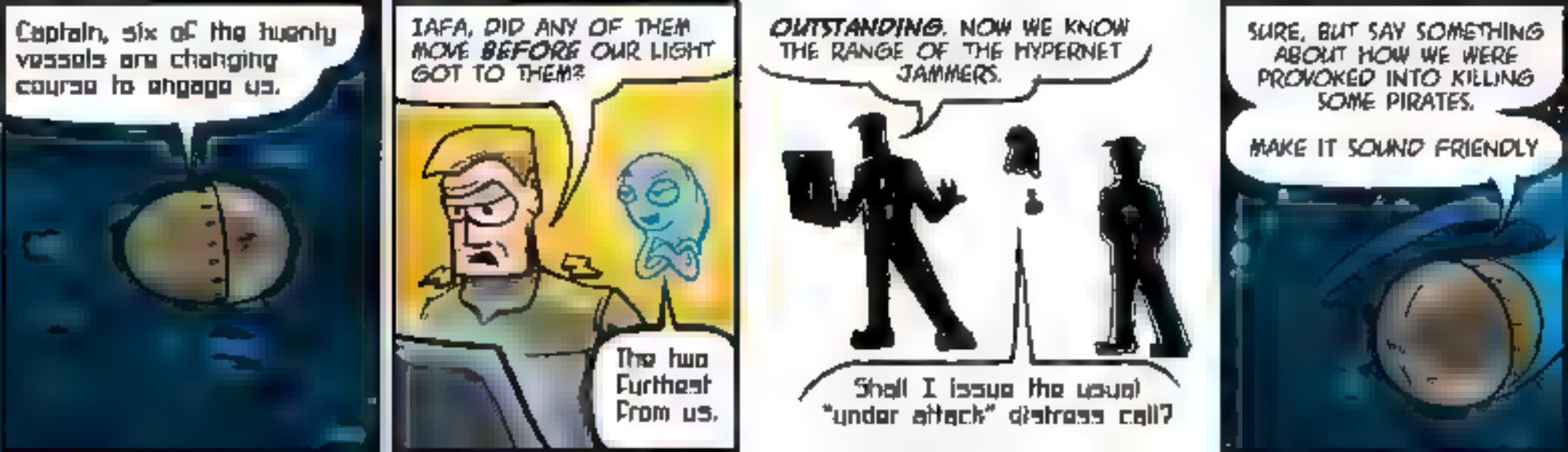

IF WE DO THAT, WE LOSE ONE OF OUR OPTIONS FOR DISABLING THE DEPOT'S JAMMERS.

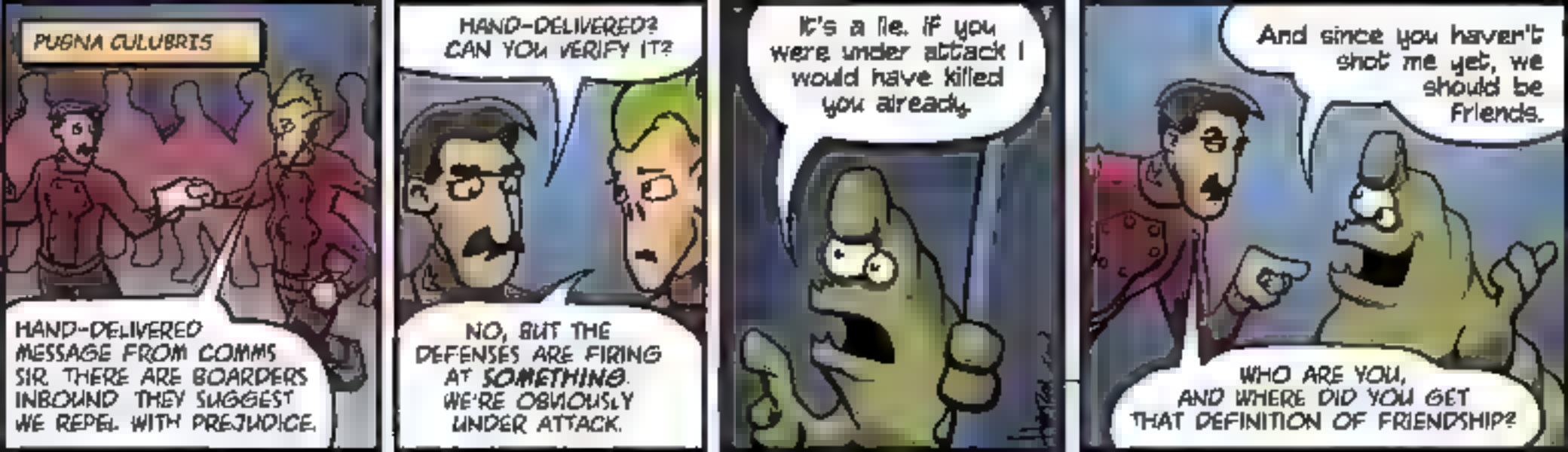

FIRING ON THE DEPOT IS NOT AN OPTION. IT IS A TEMPTATION.

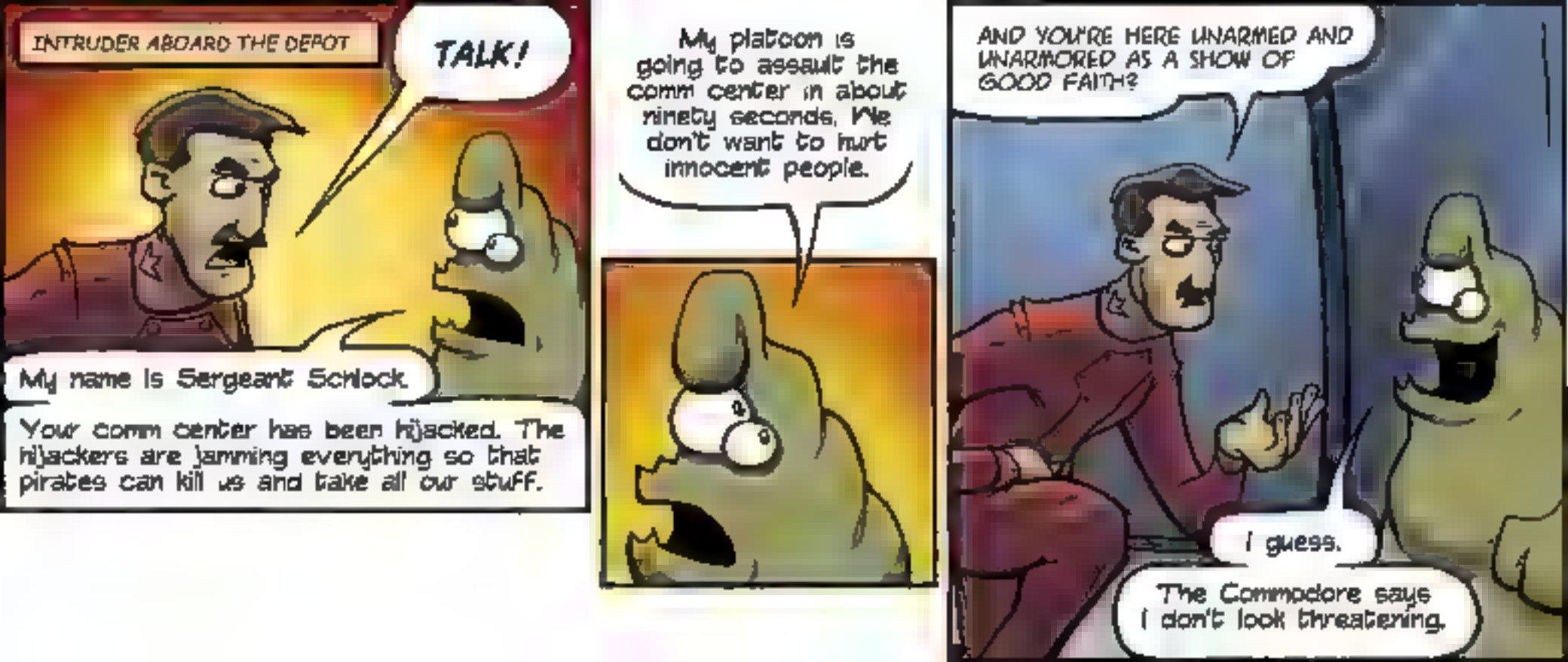

YOU FEEL IT TOO? THE ITCH TO JUST... LAY WASTE?
THERE'S WORTHIER WASTE TO LAY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF CINDY'S HULL.


CINDY OPENED A HATCH FOR US. HOW DO YOU WANT TO DO THIS, COMMODORE?
YOU'RE THE SHIP-TO-SHIP EXPERT, SON. THE "HOW" IS YOUR PROBLEM.
AND TO THINK THAT FOR ALMOST THIRTY YEARS I WAS CONVINCED THAT YOU DIDN'T LOVE ME.


CINDERCONE
Broken Wind is away, Captain.
ALRIGHT LET'S SEE WHAT SOME ACTIVE POINT DEFENSE CAN ACCOMPLISH.
Tagon is racing away from the engagement, and the boats are scattering as well.
DID ANYBODY REMEMBER TO TELL HIM THAT POINT DEFENSE HAPPENS BETWEEN US AND THE BAD GUYS?


Captain, six of the twenty vessels are changing course to engage us.
IAFA, DID ANY OF THEM MOVE BEFORE OUR LIGHT GOT TO THEM?
The two furthest from us.
OUTSTANDING. NOW WE KNOW THE RANGE OF THE HYPERNET JAMMERS.
Shall I issue the usual "under attack" distress call?
SURE, BUT SAY SOMETHING ABOUT HOW WE WERE PROVOKED INTO KILLING SOME PIRATES.
MAKE IT SOUND FRIENDLY

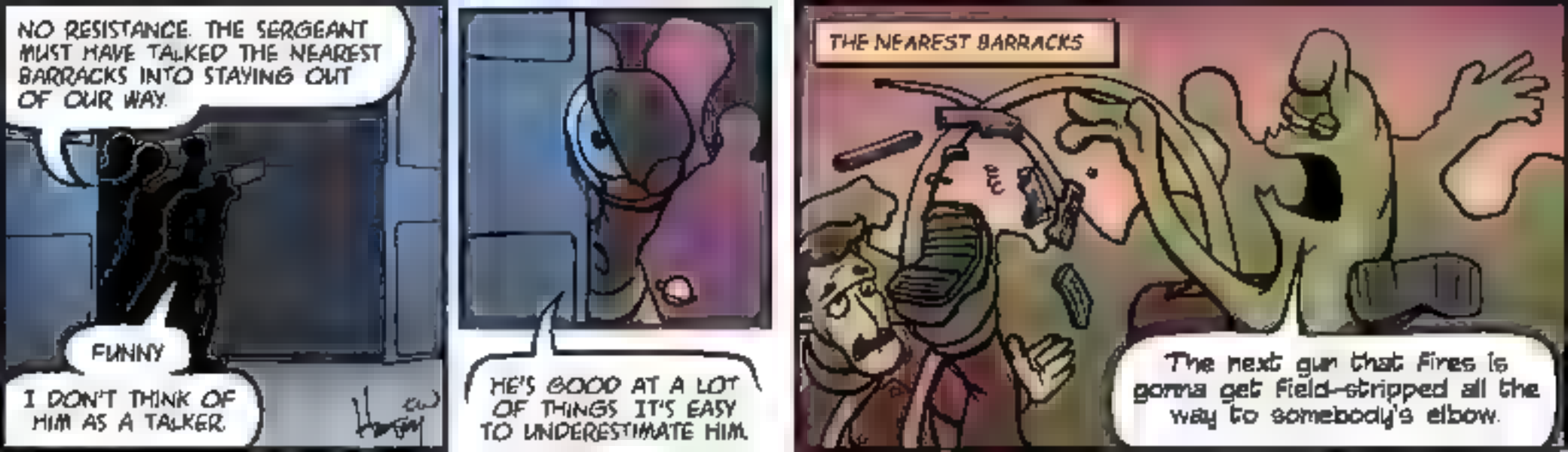

PUGNA CULUBRIS
HAND-DELIVERED MESSAGE FROM COMMS SIR. THERE ARE BOARDERS INBOUND. THEY SUGGEST WE REPEL WITH PREJUDICE.
HAND-DELIVERED? CAN YOU VERIFY IT?
NO, BUT THE DEFENSES ARE FIRING AT SOMETHING. WE'RE OBVIOUSLY UNDER ATTACK.
It's a lie. If you were under attack I would have killed you already.
And since you haven't shot me yet, we should be friends.
WHO ARE YOU, AND WHERE DID YOU GET THAT DEFINITION OF FRIENDSHIP?

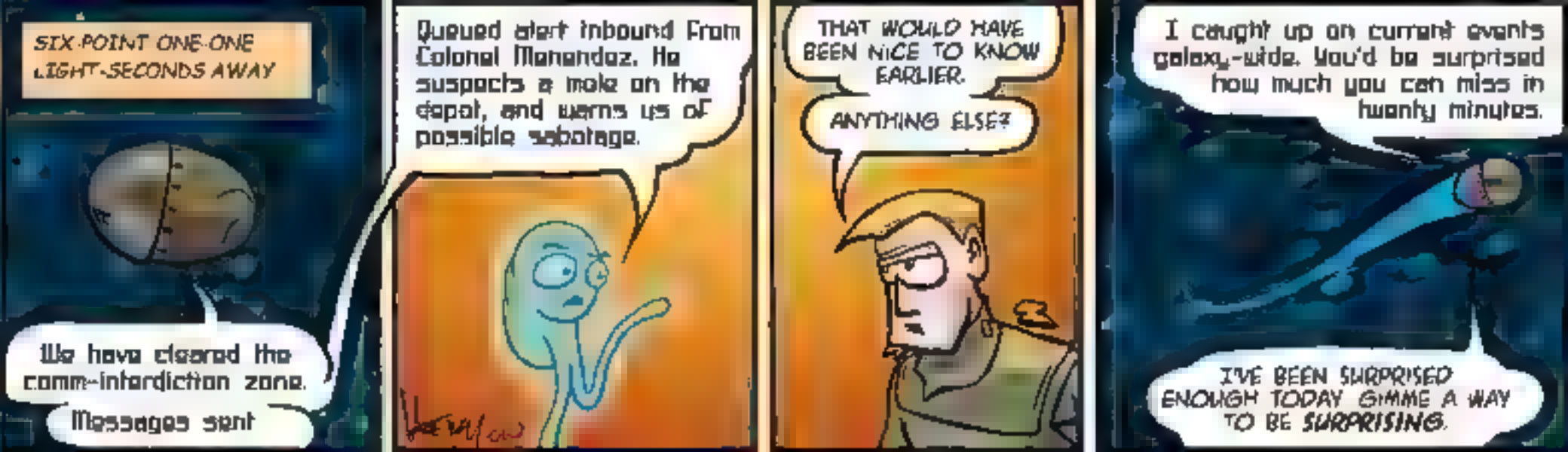

INTRUDER ABOARD THE DEPOT
TALK!
My name is Sergeant Schlock.
Your comm center has been hijacked. The hijackers are jamming everything so that pirates can kill us and take all our stuff.
My platoon is going to assault the comm center in about ninety seconds. We don't want to hurt innocent people.
AND YOU'RE HERE UNARMED AND UNARMORED AS A SHOW OF GOOD FAITH?
I guess.
The Commodore says I don't look threatening.

I'm gonna have to talk to him about how he thinks I don't look.

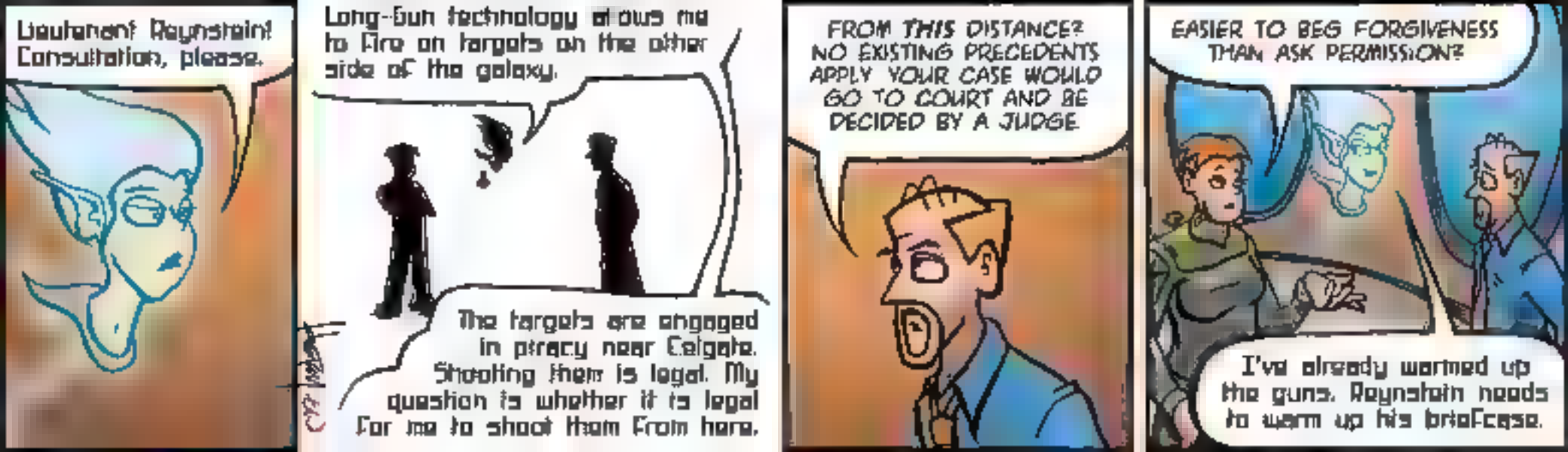
THANK YOU FOR WARNING US OF THE IMPENDING ASSAULT, SERGEANT
PERKEY, WATCH THE PRISONER I'M TAKING A TEAM TO THE COMM CENTER TO REPEL BOARDERS.
Am I the prisoner?
YUP.
Okay, Perkey.
Your boss said "watch."
Set your helmet to record. Otherwise you're gonna miss something.

ON THE HULL OF THE DEPOT.
FIRE IN THE HOLE!
GO GO GO!
YOU NEED TO FIRE A BIGGER HOLE
I GUESS WE'RE COVERING THE EXIT


NO RESISTANCE. THE SERGEANT MUST HAVE TALKED THE NEAREST BARRACKS INTO STAYING OUT OF OUR WAY.
FUNNY
I DON'T THINK OF HIM AS A TALKER.
HE'S GOOD AT A LOT OF THINGS. IT'S EASY TO UNDERESTIMATE HIM.
THE NEAREST BARRACKS
The next gun that fires is gonna get field-stripped all the way to somebody's elbow.

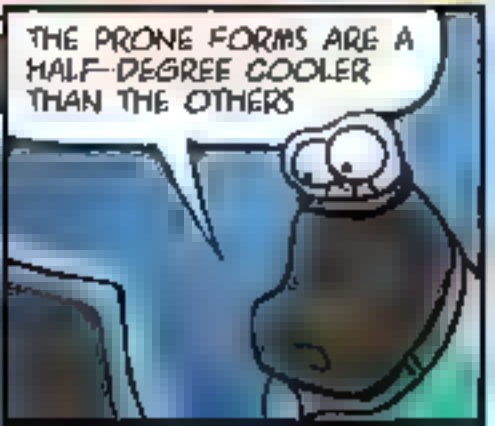

SIX POINT ONE ONE LIGHT-SECONDS AWAY
We have cleared the comm-interdiction zone.
Messages sent
Queued alert inbound from Colonel Menendez. He suspects a mole on the depot, and warns us of possible sabotage.
THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE TO KNOW EARLIER.
ANYTHING ELSE?
I caught up on current events galaxy-wide. You'd be surprised how much you can miss in twenty minutes.
I'VE BEEN SURPRISED ENOUGH TODAY. GIMME A WAY TO BE SURPRISING.

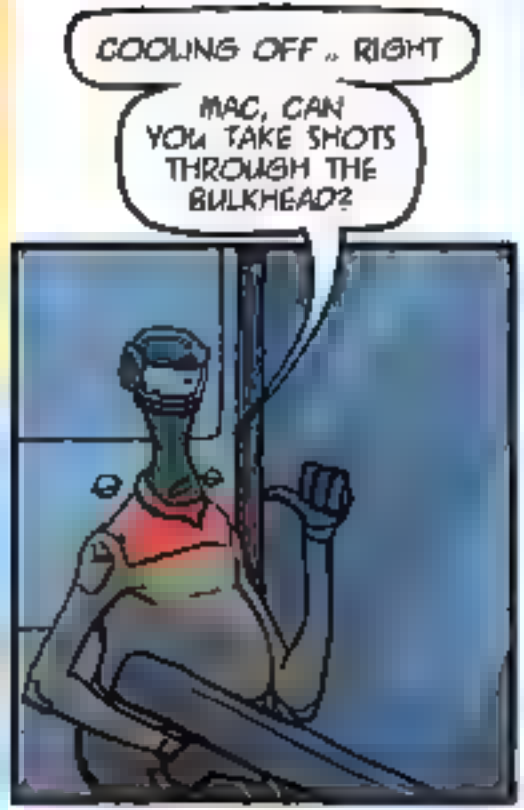
JUMPSTAR PRIME
REYNSTEIN! ON ME!
WHAT'S GOING ON? WHERE'S THE FIRE?
NO FIRE YET
CHINOOK IS AWAITING REAL TIME TARGET POSITIONS.
"TARGET POSITIONS?"
THIS SOUNDS SERIOUS.
WE'RE CONSULTING WITH YOU BEFORE OPENING FIRE. IS THAT SERIOUS?
AS YOUR ATTORNEY, MY PROFESSIONAL OPINION IS THAT IT'S "UNUSUALLY COURTEOUS."

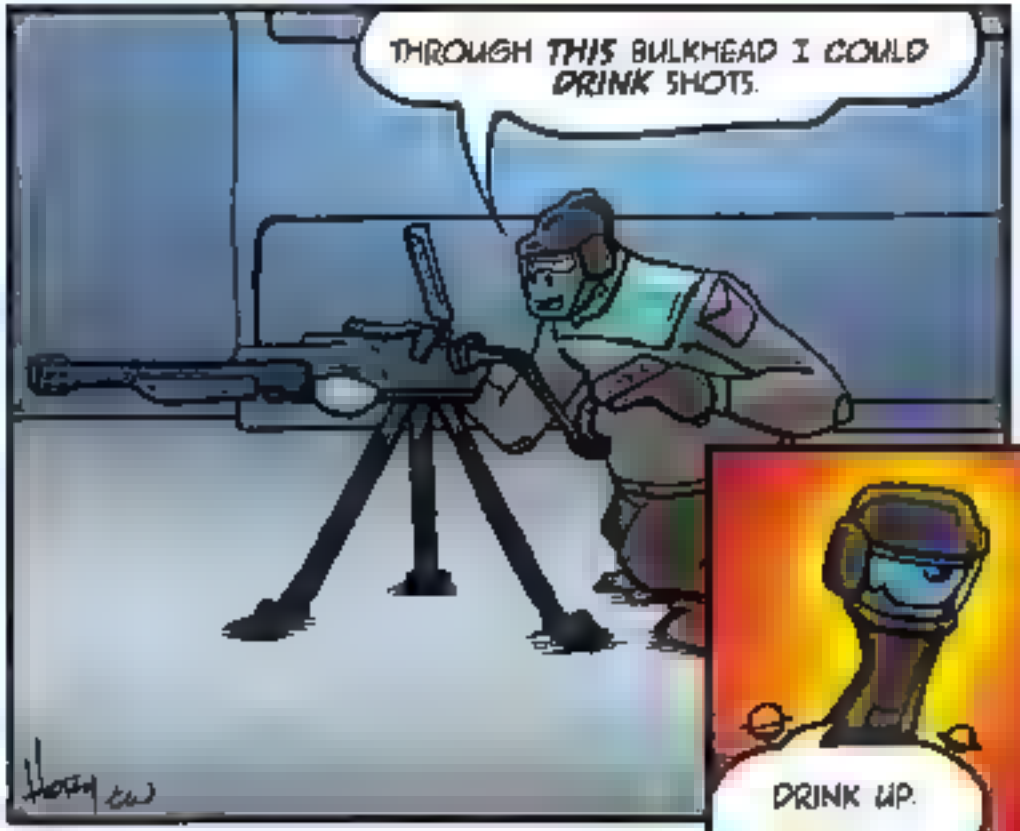

Lieutenant Reynstein! Consultation, please.
Long-Gun technology allows me to fire on targets on the other side of the galaxy.
The targets are engaged in piracy near Calgate. Shooting them is legal. My question is whether it is legal for me to shoot them from here.
FROM THIS DISTANCE? NO EXISTING PRECEDENTS APPLY. YOUR CASE WOULD GO TO COURT AND BE DECIDED BY A JUDGE.
EASIER TO BEG FORGIVENESS THAN ASK PERMISSION?
I've already warmed up the guns. Reynstein needs to warm up his briefcase.

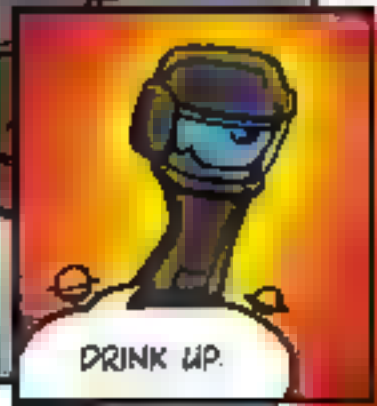
OUTSIDE THE PUGNA CULJBRIS COMM CENTER
DON'T SHOOT! THEY'RE USING US AS HUMAN SHIELDS!
knock-knock
LEGS! WHAT DOES THERMAL TELL US?
LOOKS LIKE EIGHT HOMINID HEAT SOURCES:
TWO CROUCHING, SIX PRONE.

HUMAN SHIELDS AREN'T PRONE


THE PRONE FORMS ARE A HALF-DEGREE COOLER THAN THE OTHERS


COOLING OFF .. RIGHT
MAC, CAN YOU TAKE SHOTS THROUGH THE BULKHEAD?


THROUGH THIS BULKHEAD I COULD DRINK SHOTS.


DRINK UP.

TWO CLEAN SHOTS AND ONE BUTTON-PRESS LATER

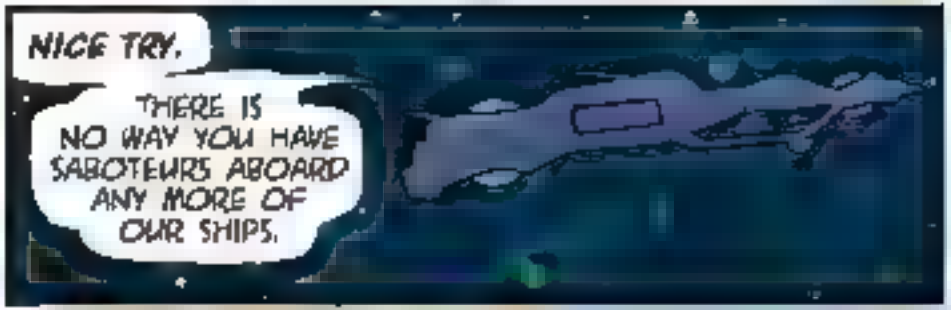
"LONG GUN" TECHNOLOGY IS BRAND NEW AND MILLIONS OF YEARS OLD

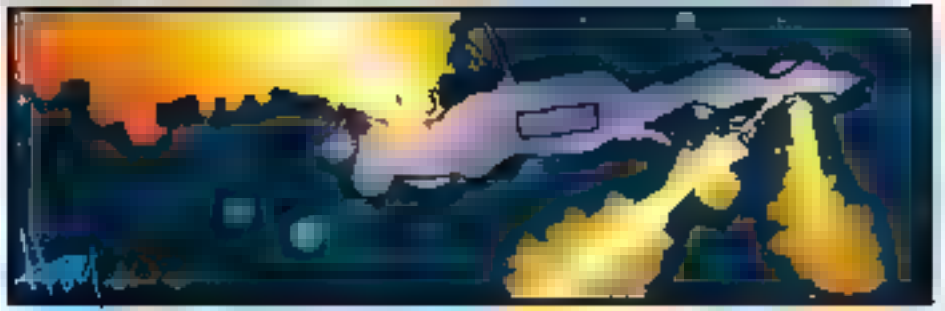
THE WEAPON TEARS A PINHOLE IN SPACE AND FIRES A BEAM OF PARTICLES THROUGH IT

THERE ARENT MANY WAYS TO DEFEND AGAINST A WEAPON THAT FIRES INSIDE A VESSEL'S SHIELDS

THERE ARE EVEN FEWER WAYS TO DEFEND AGAINST A WEAPON THAT FIRES INSIDE THE VESSEL'S HULL.

ATTENTION, HOSTILE FLEET! DROP YOUR SHIELDS AND ICE YOUR WEAPONS OR OUR SABOTEURS WILL TAKE OUT ANOTHER ANNIE PLANT
CLEVER. DO YOU THINK THEY'LL BUY IT?


NICE TRY.
THERE IS NO WAY YOU HAVE SABOTEURS ABOARD ANY MORE OF OUR SHIPS.



NOT AT FIRST, NO.

U.N.S. EMBASSY JUMPSTAR PRIME
COMMODORE TAGON IS CALLING, AMBASSADOR.
HELLO, COMMODORE. TO WHAT DO I OWE THE PLEASURE?
COULD YOU DO US A HUGE FAVOR AND CREATE A PAPER TRAIL?
WE JUST SHOT SOME PIRATES, AND WE WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE IT IF THEY THOUGHT SOMEBODY ELSE DID IT
YOUR SALES PITCH HAD BETTER BE AMAZING.

YOU KNOW ABOUT THE LONG GUN, OF COURSE.
THE TERRIFYING PROMISE OF A RETURN TO THE DARK AGES OF MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION?
YES. YES I DO.
WE USED LONG GUNS TO DISABLE SOME PIRATE VESSELS. WE'D LIKE TO KEEP THAT A SECRET
YOU SAID "DISABLE." THAT SHOWS FINESSE OUR PROTOTYPE LACKED
YOU ALSO SAID "GUNS," PLURAL.
SO MANY THINGS WE DON'T WANT TO REVEAL.

START A RUMOR ABOUT HOW THE U.N.S. ANTI-PIRACY TASK FORCE HAS DEEP-COVER MOLES EVERYWHERE. HOLD UP THIS DISABLED PIRATE FLEET AS PROOF

YOU GET TO TAKE THE CREDIT FOR THE TAKE-DOWN OF A PIRATE MENACE. *WE* GET TO AVOID THE POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS OF LONG GUN DEPLOYMENT

THE U.N.S. ANTI-PIRACY TASK FORCE *DOES* HAVE MOLES OUT THERE.

I THINK THEY'LL OBJECT TO THE PUBLICITY

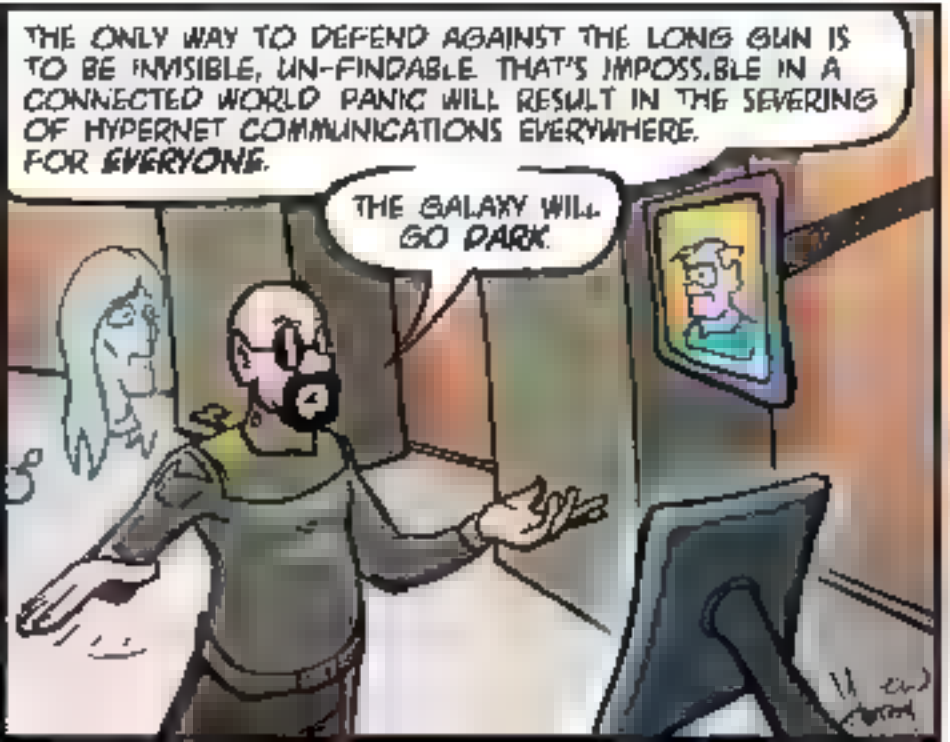
SO THEY'RE JUST COMPETENT ENOUGH TO NOT BE USEFUL.

HOW... GOVERNMENTAL.

CLEANUP BEGINS NEAR CELGATE
THE U.N.S. ISN'T WILLING TO TAKE CREDIT FOR THIS.
OUR LONG GUN SHOTS ARE GOING TO MAKE THE NEWS.
COMMODORE, DID YOU EXPLAIN WHAT'S AT STAKE HERE?

YES. THE U.N.S. DOESN'T CARE ABOUT POLITICAL FALLOUT THAT LANDS ON SOMEBODY BESIDES THEM. THEY'VE GOT THEIR OWN PROBLEMS.

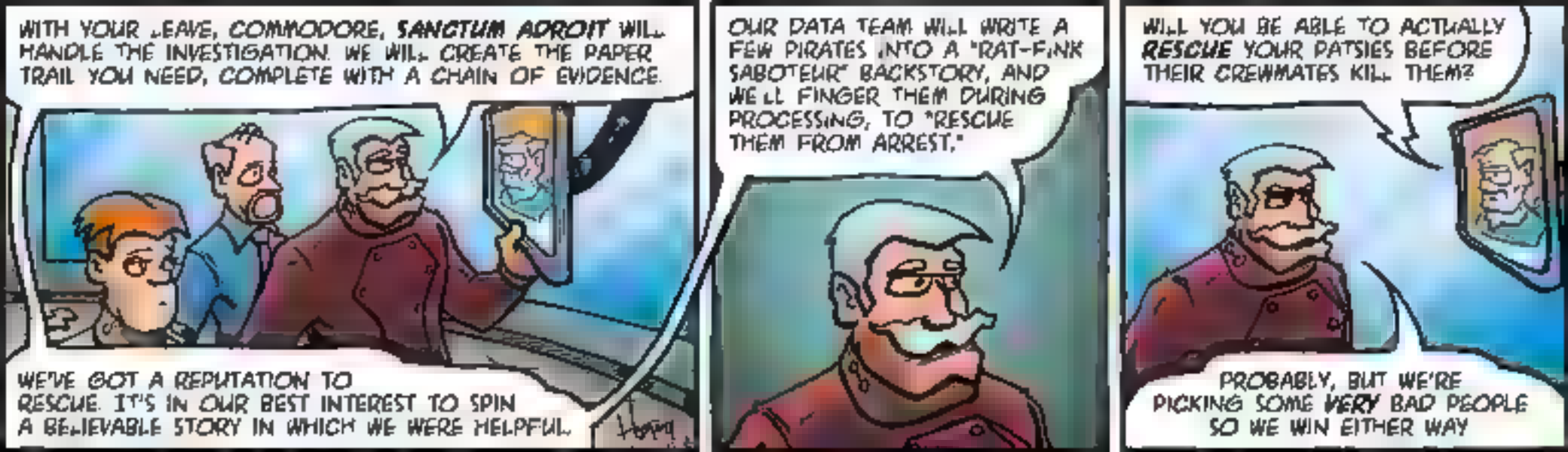
THIS IS EVERYBODY'S PROBLEM. THE LONG GUN IS ONLY DANGEROUS IF YOUR ENEMIES KNOW WHAT TO SHOOT AT
YOU'VE JUST DESCRIBED EVERY WEAPON EVER, CAPTAIN.
EVERY OTHER WEAPON CAN BE DEFENDED AGAINST IN SOME WAY, EVEN IF YOUR ENEMY HAPPENS TO HAVE YOUR LOCATION.


THE ONLY WAY TO DEFEND AGAINST THE LONG GUN IS TO BE INVISIBLE, UN-FINDABLE. THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE IN A CONNECTED WORLD. PANIC WILL RESULT IN THE SEVERING OF HYPERNET COMMUNICATIONS EVERYWHERE. FOR EVERYONE.
THE GALAXY WILL GO DARK.

SO IT'S LIKE THE EARLY 21ST, WHEN ALIENS BROKE THE INTERNET?

IT WASN'T ALIENS. IT WAS TOP SECRET GOVERNMENT AD AGENCIES. EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT.
NOBODY KNOWS WHO IT WAS, BECAUSE THE INTERNET WAS BROKEN.

COMMODORE! SORRY TO PATCH IN UNANNOUNCED, BUT MASSEY AND I HAVE A SOLUTION FOR YOU.
IT'S A SHORT-TERM FIX, BUT WE KNOW HOW TO SHIFT ATTENTION AWAY FROM THE LONG GUN.
MISDIRECTION IS OUT. THE U.N.S. WON'T TAKE CREDIT.
YOU WAVED THE WRONG CARROT, COMMODORE.
AND YOU WAVED IT IN FRONT OF THE WRONG DONKEY.
SO I'M A DONKEY, NOW?
TRY THINKING OF DONKEY STATUS AS A REPRIEVE.


WITH YOUR LEAVE, COMMODORE, SANCTUM ADROIT WILL HANDLE THE INVESTIGATION. WE WILL CREATE THE PAPER TRAIL YOU NEED, COMPLETE WITH A CHAIN OF EVIDENCE.
WE'VE GOT A REPUTATION TO RESCUE. IT'S IN OUR BEST INTEREST TO SPIN A BELIEVABLE STORY IN WHICH WE WERE HELPFUL.
OUR DATA TEAM WILL WRITE A FEW PIRATES INTO A "RAT-FINK SABOTEUR" BACKSTORY, AND WE'LL FINGER THEM DURING PROCESSING, TO "RESCUE THEM FROM ARREST."
WILL YOU BE ABLE TO ACTUALLY RESCUE YOUR PATSIES BEFORE THEIR CREWMATES KILL THEM?
PROBABLY, BUT WE'RE PICKING SOME VERY BAD PEOPLE SO WE WIN EITHER WAY

TO PUT THIS IN PERSPECTIVE, THIS IS THE LARGEST ACT OF PIRACY IN CELESCHUL SYSTEM IN TWENTY YEARS.
SANCTUM ADROIT'S ANALYSTS THINK AGENTS OF THE PORT AUTHORITY WERE INVOLVED AT SOME PRETTY HIGH LEVELS.
PER THE C.D.S. ARTICLES OF THE ORBITS SECTION 119, SUBCHAPTER 6, DEPENDENT CLAUSE 448, FOR THE NEXT ELEVEN HOURS WE CAN PROCESS THE PIRATES HOWEVER WE WANT
CAN WE SHOOT THEM ALL AND TAKE THEIR SHIPS?
WE CAN PROCESS THE PIRATES ALMOST HOWEVER WE WANT

IF IT'S LEGAL, AND IF YOU THINK IT WILL WORK, I'M IN.
WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM US, COLONEL?

GET YOUR FORCES OUT OF THE AREA.
START BY GETTING SERGEANT SCHLOCK OFF MY DEPOT
OH, HULLNUTS. WHAT'S HE DOING?

TALKING.
AN ACTUAL TRUCKLOAD OF CHAINSAWS?
WHERE DO I SIGN UP?

LATER..
SARGE, MY BLATTCO 15MM IS MISSING.
WE'RE ALL STILL LOOKING FOR PIECES OF OUR WEAPONS.
IT DIDN'T GET FIELD-STRIPPED BY THE AMORPH. IT WAS IN MY LOCKER.
I'LL LOOK INTO IT, BUT THE AMORPH SEEMED MORE LIKE A GARDEN TOOLS KIND OF GUY.
ABOARD CINDERCONE
The box said "Blattco Clawhammer" but I think it just shoots regular bullets.
IF YOU EVER DO FIND A GUN THAT FIRES HAMMERS, YOU ARE UNDER EXPLICIT ORDERS TO PUT IT BACK WHERE YOU FOUND IT

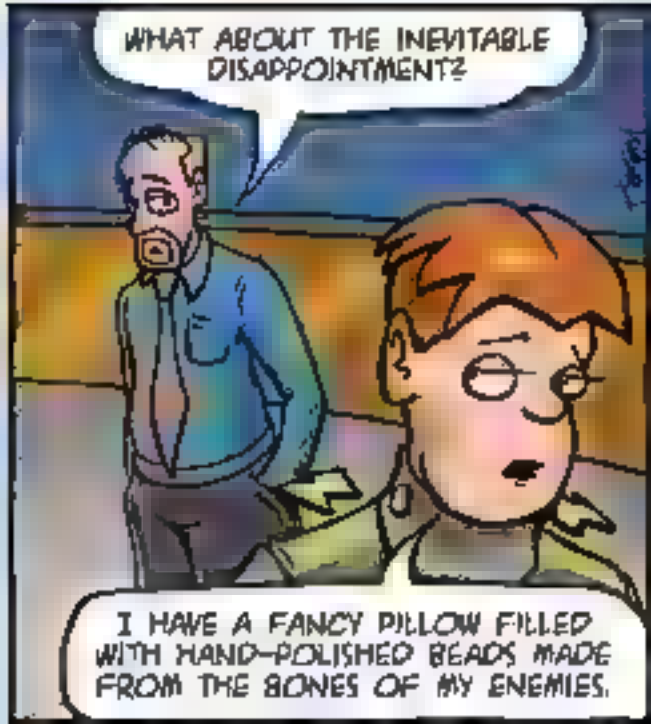
WAIT. WHAT BOX? WHERE DID YOU GET THAT PIECE?
A locker on the depot. It smelled shiny.
YOU PILLAGED THE SANCTUM ADROIT BARRACKS?
DON'T ANSWER THAT. I HAVE A BETTER QUESTION.
WHAT DOES "SHINY" SMELL LIKE?
Love, money, and engineering.
Sometimes with a whiff of Boomex.

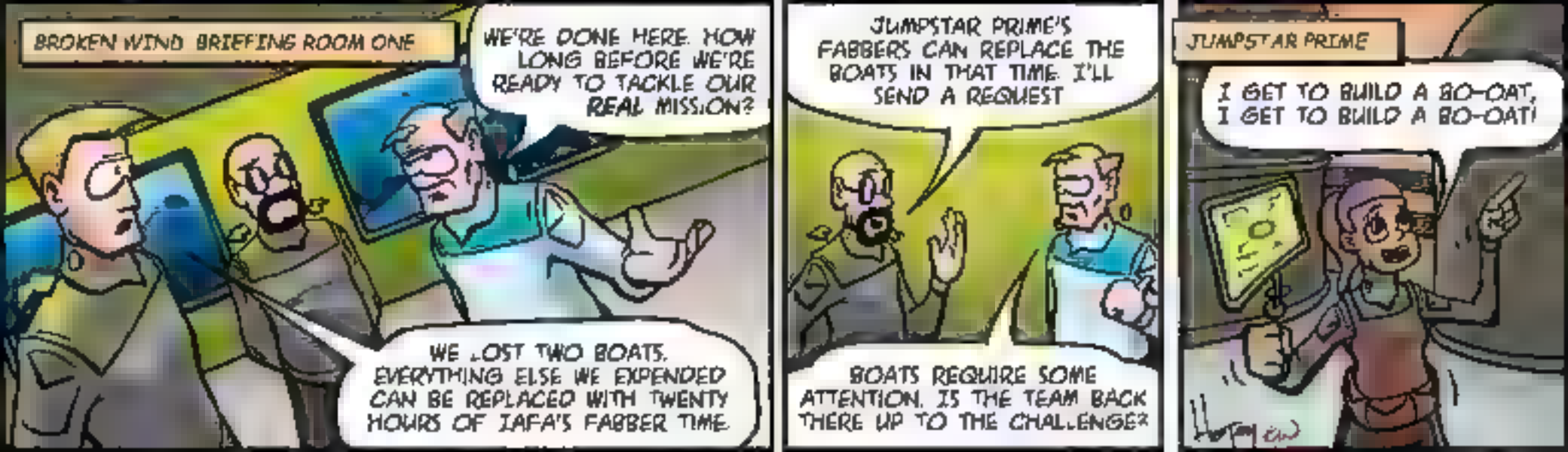
JUMPSTAR PRIME.
TODAY BEGAN SO BEAUTIFULLY...
I WAS DOING THE BEST WORK, THE MOST IMPORTANT WORK ANY LAWYER CAN ASPIRE TO!
I WAS TRYING CASES IN ADVANCE BY CRAFTING A CONSTITUTION!
HOW DO YOU BALANCE RESTRICTIONS AGAINST RIGHTS? HOW DO YOU PROTECT AND SERVE WITHOUT INJURY OR INFRINGEMENT?
IT IS AN ANCIENT QUESTION, POSED SHARPLY AGAINST THE BEATING HEART OF EVERY CIVILIZATION.
IT HAS BEEN ANSWERED COUNTLESS TIMES. ELEGANCE, ERROR, AND EPIPHANY SHINE BRIGHTLY ACROSS THE EONS.

I COULD HAVE LOST MYSELF IN THE GALAXY'S LEGAL LIBRARIES FOR LIFETIMES UNCOVERING THE QUINTESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF LEGISLATIVE ALCHEMY
THEN I INTERRUPTED YOUR FUN.
NOT INTERRUPTED. CORRUPTED.
YOUR DILEMMA REQUIRED A SOLUTION BUILT UPON THE VERY EXCESSES I SOUGHT TO PREVENT
YOU TURNED IT INTO OPPOSITE DAY

RELAX, MASSEY WE'RE LETTING OUR POLICE TAKE CARE OF SOME PIRATES. LEGALLY, THANKS TO YOU.
LEGAL ISN'T ALWAYS ENOUGH TO LET ME SLEEP WITH A CLEAN CONSCIENCE.

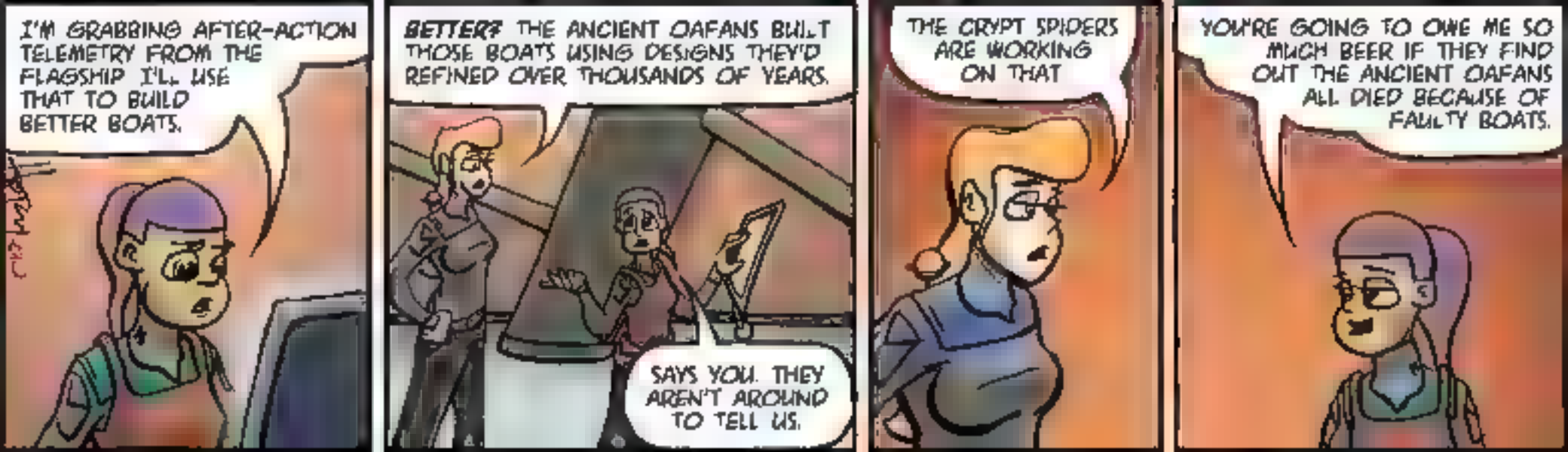
DO WHAT I DO.
I LIE IN BED AND TELL MYSELF HAPPY STORIES ABOUT ALL THE GOOD THINGS I'LL DO TOMORROW.


WHAT ABOUT THE INEVITABLE DISAPPOINTMENT?
I HAVE A FANCY PILLOW FILLED WITH HAND-POLISHED BEADS MADE FROM THE BONES OF MY ENEMIES.

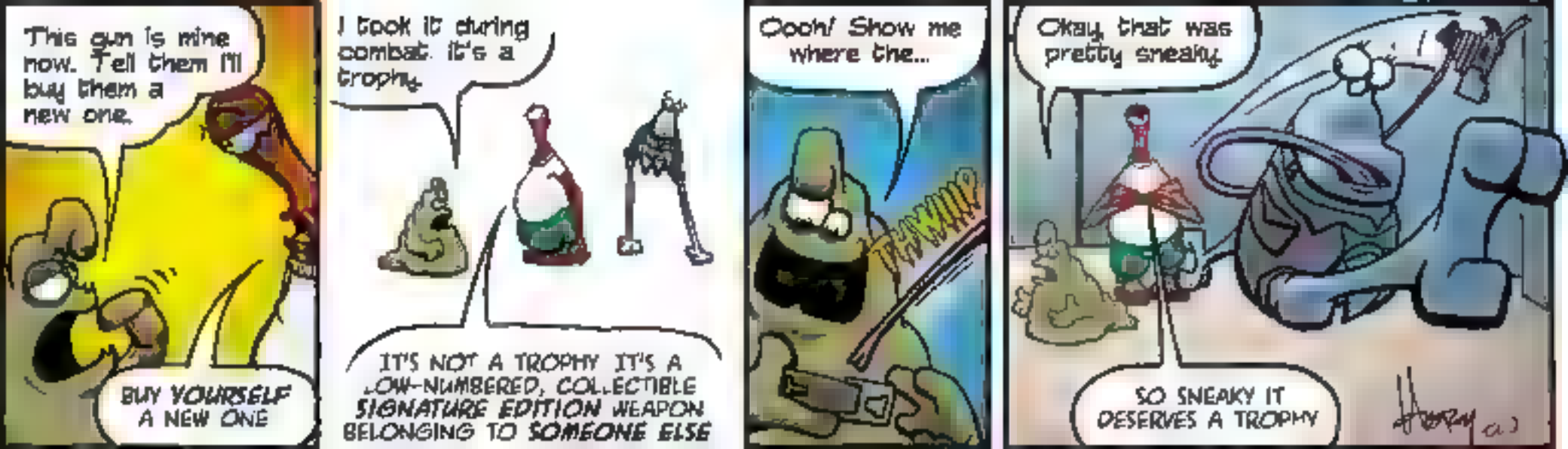

BROKEN WIND BRIEFING ROOM ONE
WE'RE DONE HERE. HOW LONG BEFORE WE'RE READY TO TACKLE OUR REAL MISSION?
WE LOST TWO BOATS. EVERYTHING ELSE WE EXPENDED CAN BE REPLACED WITH TWENTY HOURS OF IAFA'S FABBER TIME.
JUMPSTAR PRIME'S FABBERS CAN REPLACE THE BOATS IN THAT TIME. I'LL SEND A REQUEST
BOATS REQUIRE SOME ATTENTION. IS THE TEAM BACK THERE UP TO THE CHALLENGE?
JUMPSTAR PRIME
I GET TO BUILD A BO-OAT, I GET TO BUILD A BO-OAT!

CHECK THE REQUISITION. YOU GET TO BUILD TWO BOATS.
I GUESS THAT MEANS I'LL BE FABBING THREE.
ONE PROTOTYPE. AND TWO REFINED MODELS.
NO, WAIT FOUR. I'LL MAKE TWO PROTOTYPES, AND THEN MAKE THEM FIGHT
DELIVERY IN TWENTY HOURS, VENTURA.
THAT DOESN'T GIVE ME ANY TIME TO SCREW UP.
IT DOESN'T GIVE YOU ANY TIME TO SCREW AROUND.

WHY DOES TAGON NEED REPLACEMENT BOATS?
THEY WERE DESTROYED BY PIRATES.
PIRATES? WHY DIDN'T YOU LEAD WITH THAT?
BECAUSE I THOUGHT YOU HAD READ TODAY'S DISPATCHES.
NO FLOATY THINGIES. NOT AN OFFICER ANYMORE.
NEEDING YOUR EXPERTISE IS PAINFUL IN SO MANY WAYS.


I'M GRABBING AFTER-ACTION TELEMETRY FROM THE FLAGSHIP. I'LL USE THAT TO BUILD BETTER BOATS.
BETTER? THE ANCIENT OAFANS BUILT THOSE BOATS USING DESIGNS THEY'D REFINED OVER THOUSANDS OF YEARS.
SAYS YOU. THEY AREN'T AROUND TO TELL US.
THE CRYPT SPIDERS ARE WORKING ON THAT
YOU'RE GOING TO OWE ME SO MUCH BEER IF THEY FIND OUT THE ANCIENT OAFANS ALL DIED BECAUSE OF FAULTY BOATS.

CINDERCONE MUSTER STATION FIVE
BAD NEWS, SERGEANT
I GOT A CALL FROM THE DEPOT. THEY'RE LOOKING FOR THAT WEAPON YOU STOLE.
It's not bad news if they're still looking for it.
BAD NEWS, SERGEANT.

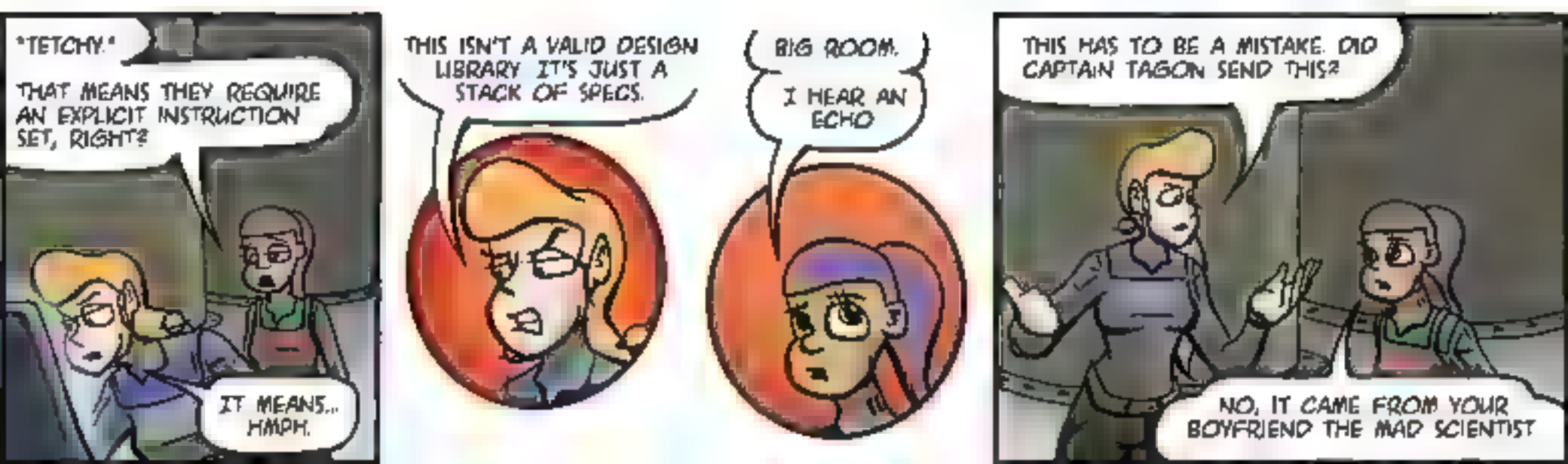

This gun is mine now. Tell them I'll buy them a new one.
BUY YOURSELF A NEW ONE
I took it during combat. It's a trophy.
IT'S NOT A TROPHY. IT'S A LOW-NUMBERED, COLLECTIBLE SIGNATURE EDITION WEAPON BELONGING TO SOMEONE ELSE
Oooh! Show me where the...
THWIP
Okay, that was pretty sneaky.
SO SNEAKY IT DESERVES A TROPHY

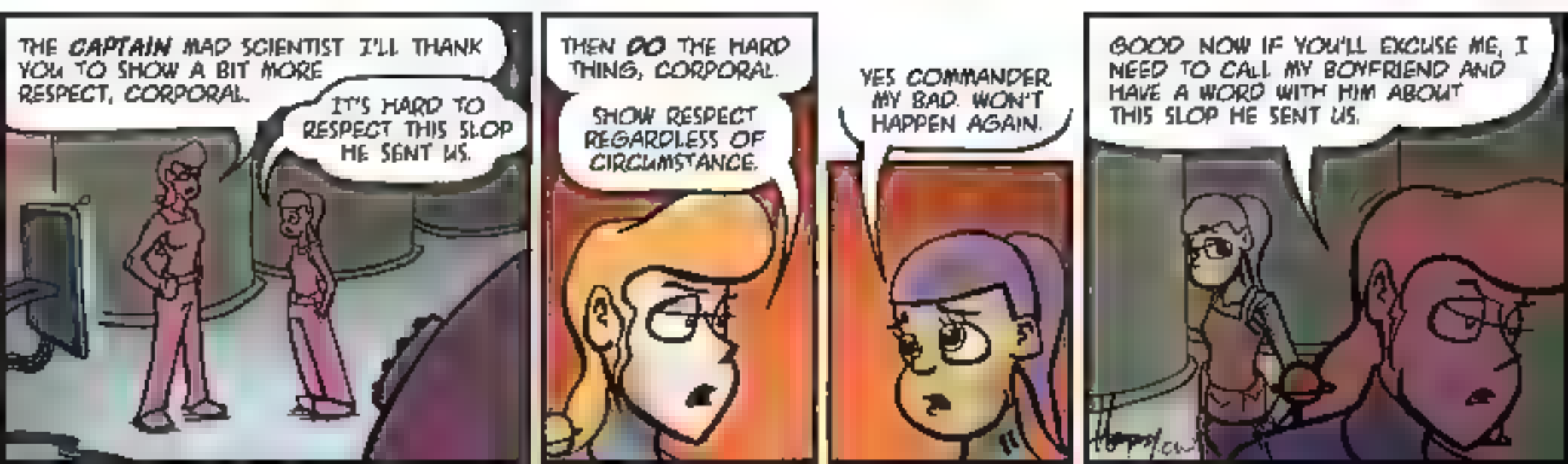
JUMPSTAR PRIME
FABBER CONTROL
IT WON'T COMPILE
THERE ARE MILLIONS OF LINKAGE FAILURES, AND THE FABBER IS THROWING SO MANY "BAD GET-REF" ALERTS I FEEL LIKE I SHOULD APOLOGIZE TO IT

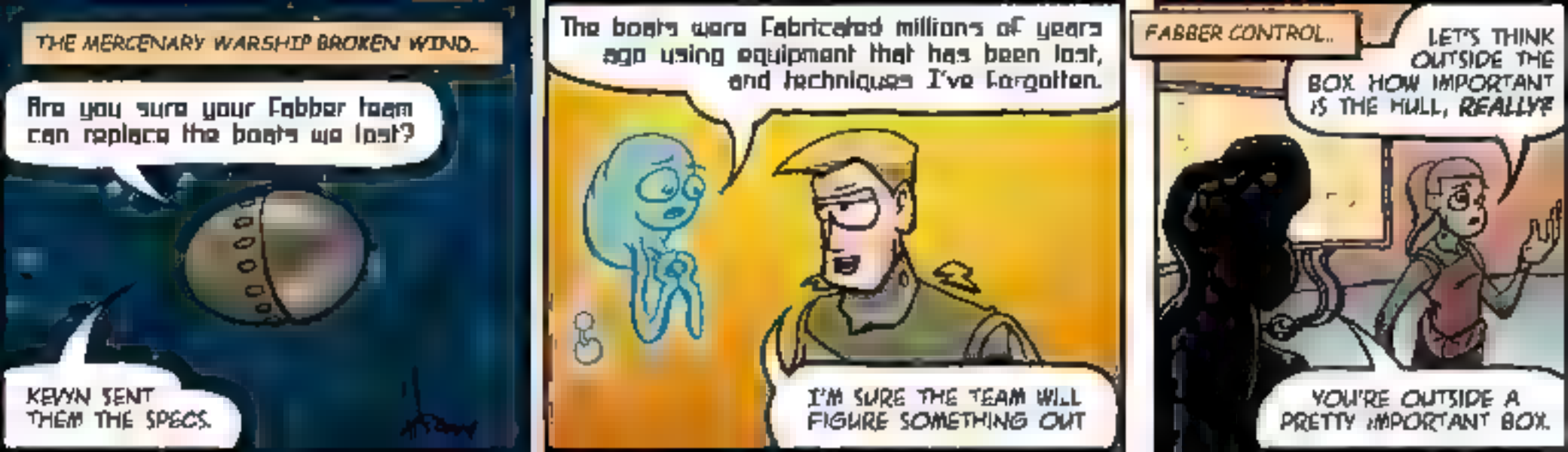
YOU SHOULD.
I TOLD YOU NOT TO TWEAK THE DESIGN.

I DIDN'T I WASN'T GIVEN A DESIGN. I WAS GIVEN A STACK OF SPECS THAT WON'T COMPILE.

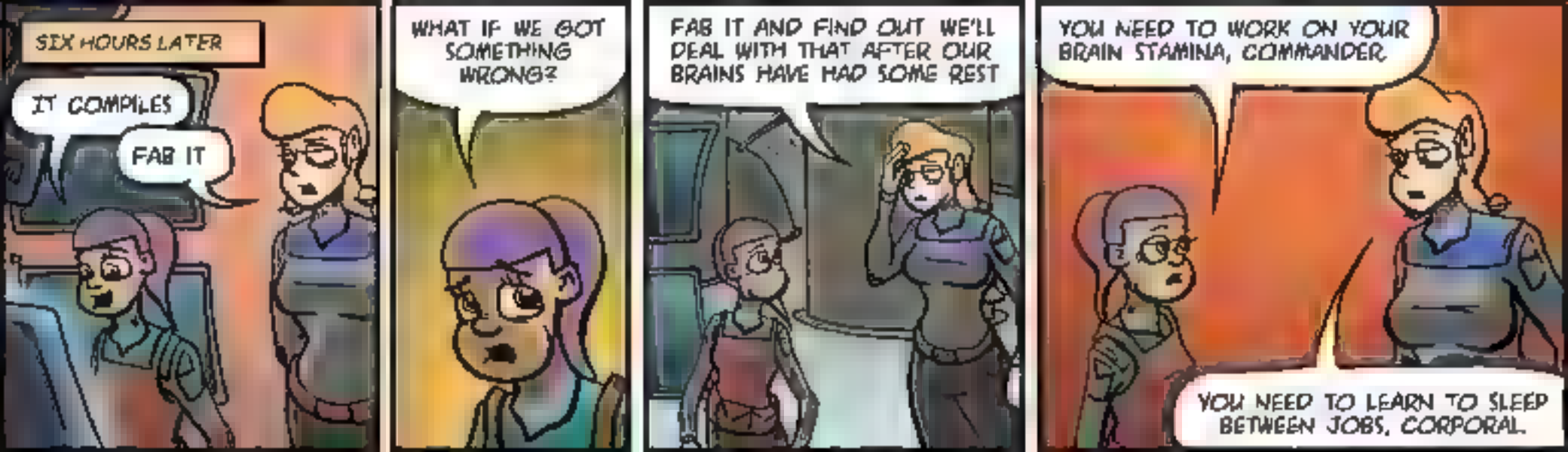
LET ME HAVE A GO AT IT. FABBERS ARE TETCHY.

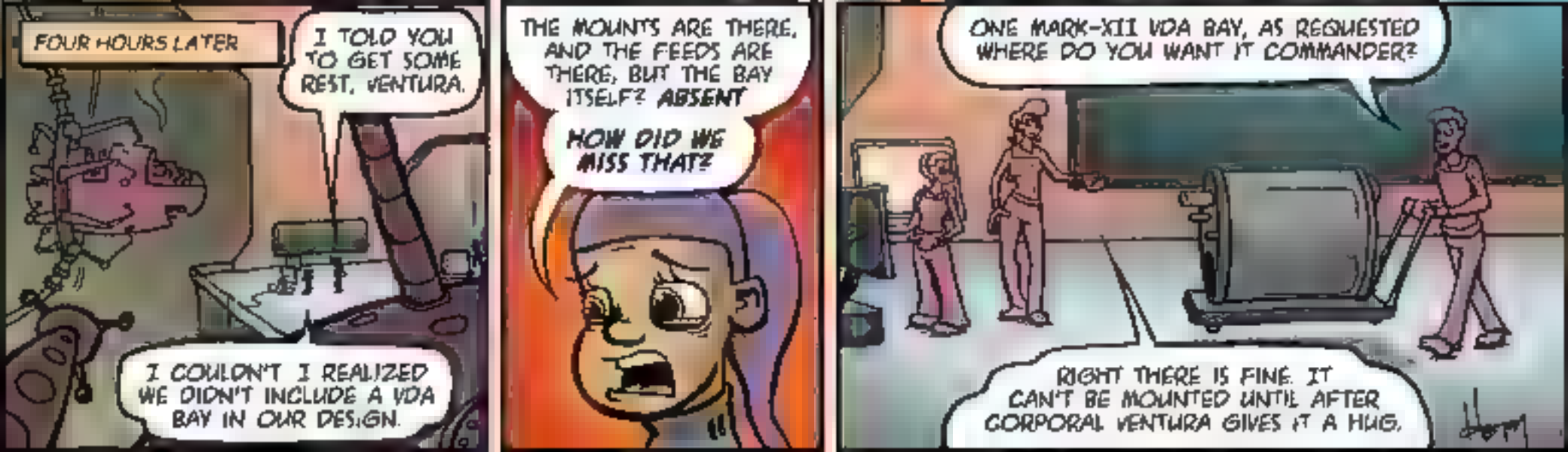

"TETCHY."
THAT MEANS THEY REQUIRE AN EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION SET, RIGHT?
IT MEANS... HMPH.
THIS ISN'T A VALID DESIGN LIBRARY IT'S JUST A STACK OF SPECS.
BIG ROOM.
I HEAR AN ECHO
THIS HAS TO BE A MISTAKE. DID CAPTAIN TAGON SEND THIS?
NO, IT CAME FROM YOUR BOYFRIEND THE MAD SCIENTIST

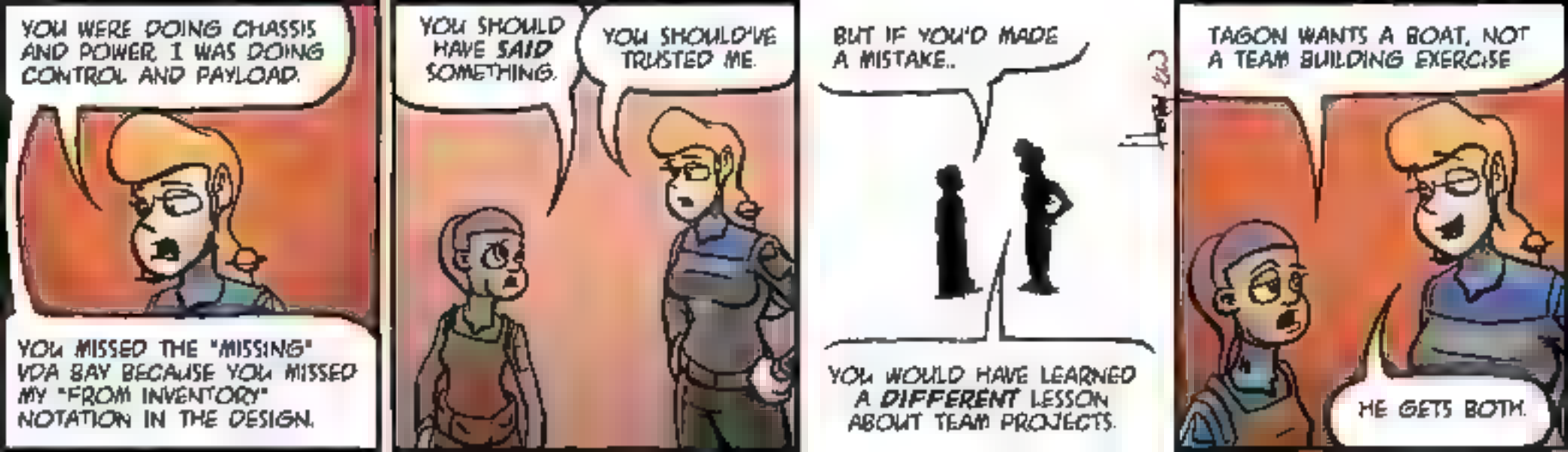

THE CAPTAIN MAD SCIENTIST I'LL THANK YOU TO SHOW A BIT MORE RESPECT, CORPORAL.
IT'S HARD TO RESPECT THIS SLOP HE SENT US.
THEN DO THE HARD THING, CORPORAL.
SHOW RESPECT REGARDLESS OF CIRCUMSTANCE.
YES COMMANDER. MY BAD. WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN.
GOOD. NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I NEED TO CALL MY BOYFRIEND AND HAVE A WORD WITH HIM ABOUT THIS SLOP HE SENT US.

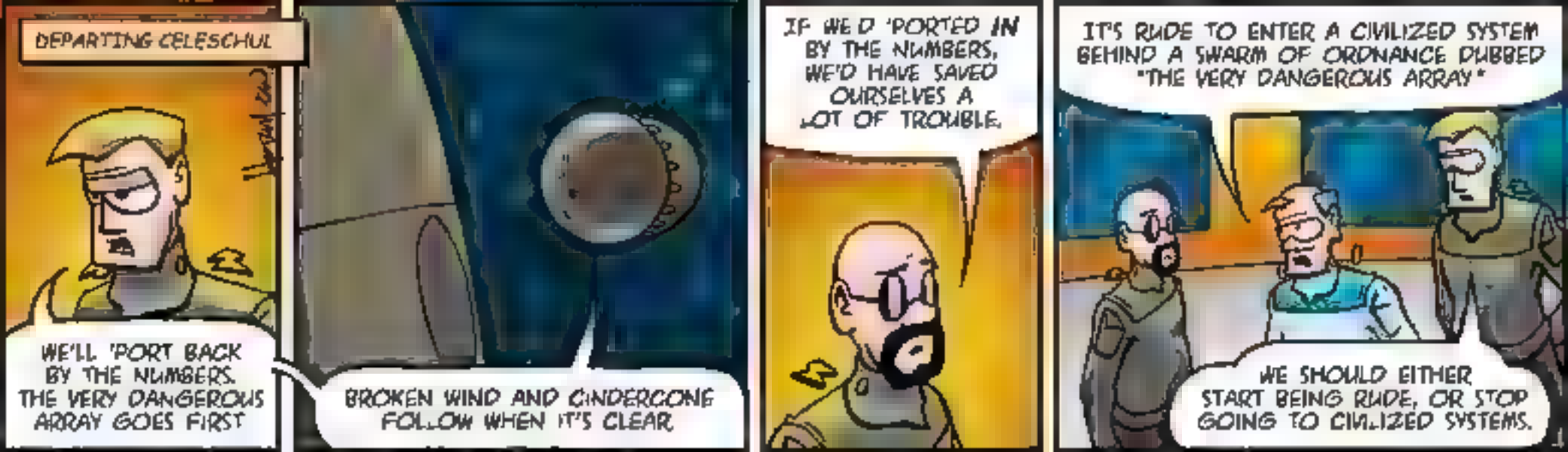

THE MERCENARY WARSHIP BROKEN WIND..
Are you sure your Fabber team can replace the boats we lost?
KEVYN SENT THEM THE SPECS.
The boats were fabricated millions of years ago using equipment that has been lost, and techniques I've forgotten.
I'M SURE THE TEAM WILL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT
FABBER CONTROL..
LET'S THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX. HOW IMPORTANT IS THE HULL, REALLY?
YOU'RE OUTSIDE A PRETTY IMPORTANT BOX.

I'M NOT SAYING "NO HULL." I JUST WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE ORIGINAL OAFAN HULL ACTUALLY ACCOMPLISHED.
THE ENEMY'S BREACHER PHALANX ONLY MANAGED TO PUNCH A SINGLE 80 CENTIMETER HOLE, BUT THE PLASMA POURING THROUGH IT COOKED EVERYTHING. KILL SHOT.
GOTTA STOP MISSILES FURTHER OUT
DITCH THE PRICEY HULL, AND FOCUS ON MORE POINT DEFENSES AND BETTER SHIELDS.
TABON LIKES THE FANCY HULLS. A DOWNGRADED HULL WILL BE A HARD SELL
PAINT A RACING STRIPE ON IT?
OOOH, NOSE ART!
WE DISTRACT HIM WITH NOSE ART


SIX HOURS LATER
IT COMPILES
FAB IT
WHAT IF WE GOT SOMETHING WRONG?
FAB IT AND FIND OUT WE'LL DEAL WITH THAT AFTER OUR BRAINS HAVE HAD SOME REST
YOU NEED TO WORK ON YOUR BRAIN STAMINA, COMMANDER
YOU NEED TO LEARN TO SLEEP BETWEEN JOBS, CORPORAL.


FOUR HOURS LATER
I TOLD YOU TO GET SOME REST, VENTURA.
I COULDN'T. I REALIZED WE DIDN'T INCLUDE A VDA BAY IN OUR DESIGN.
THE MOUNTS ARE THERE, AND THE FEEDS ARE THERE, BUT THE BAY ITSELF? ABSENT
HOW DID WE MISS THAT?
ONE MARK-XII VDA BAY, AS REQUESTED. WHERE DO YOU WANT IT COMMANDER?
RIGHT THERE IS FINE. IT CAN'T BE MOUNTED UNTIL AFTER CORPORAL VENTURA GIVES IT A HUG.


YOU WERE DOING CHASSIS AND POWER. I WAS DOING CONTROL AND PAYLOAD.
YOU MISSED THE "MISSING" VDA BAY BECAUSE YOU MISSED MY "FROM INVENTORY" NOTATION IN THE DESIGN.
YOU SHOULD HAVE SAID SOMETHING.
YOU SHOULD'VE TRUSTED ME.
BUT IF YOU'D MADE A MISTAKE..
YOU WOULD HAVE LEARNED A DIFFERENT LESSON ABOUT TEAM PROJECTS.
TAGON WANTS A BOAT, NOT A TEAM BUILDING EXERCISE
HE GETS BOTH.


DEPARTING CELESCHUL
WE'LL 'PORT BACK BY THE NUMBERS. THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY GOES FIRST
BROKEN WIND AND CINDERCONE FOLLOW WHEN IT'S CLEAR
IF WE'D 'PORTED IN BY THE NUMBERS, WE'D HAVE SAVED OURSELVES A LOT OF TROUBLE.
IT'S RUDE TO ENTER A CIVILIZED SYSTEM BEHIND A SWARM OF ORDNANCE DUBBED "THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY"
WE SHOULD EITHER START BEING RUDE, OR STOP GOING TO CIVILIZED SYSTEMS.

BROKEN WIND'S SLIP #9 ONE "BY THE-NUMBERS" TERAPORT LATER

TRANSFERRING BOAT HELMS TO YOU, IAFA. TAKE 'EM IN.

Accepted and engaged.

Oooh, I like what you've done with the place.

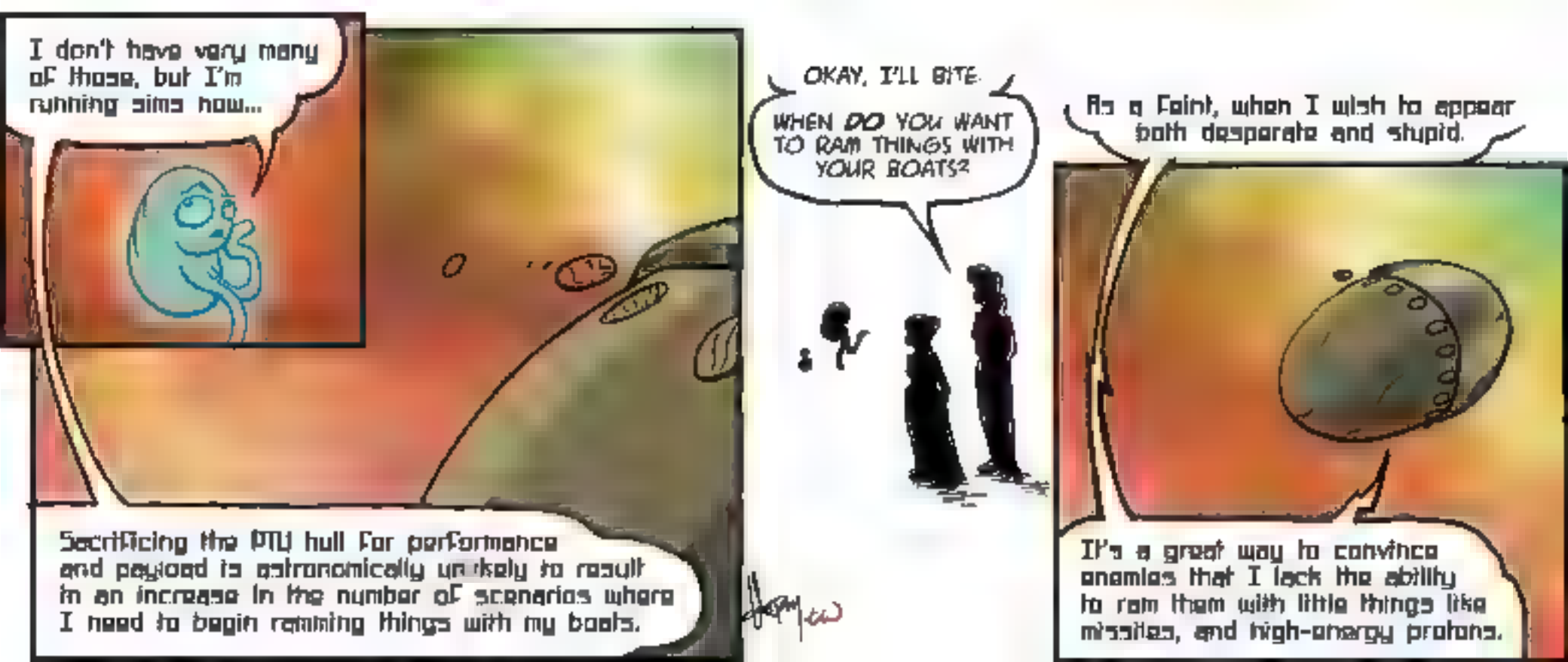
THESE NEW BOATS HAVE LESS HULL, BUT FAR MORE PUNCH THAN THE TWO YOU LOST IN COMBAT

#9 AND #10 MAY BE NEW FAVORITES.

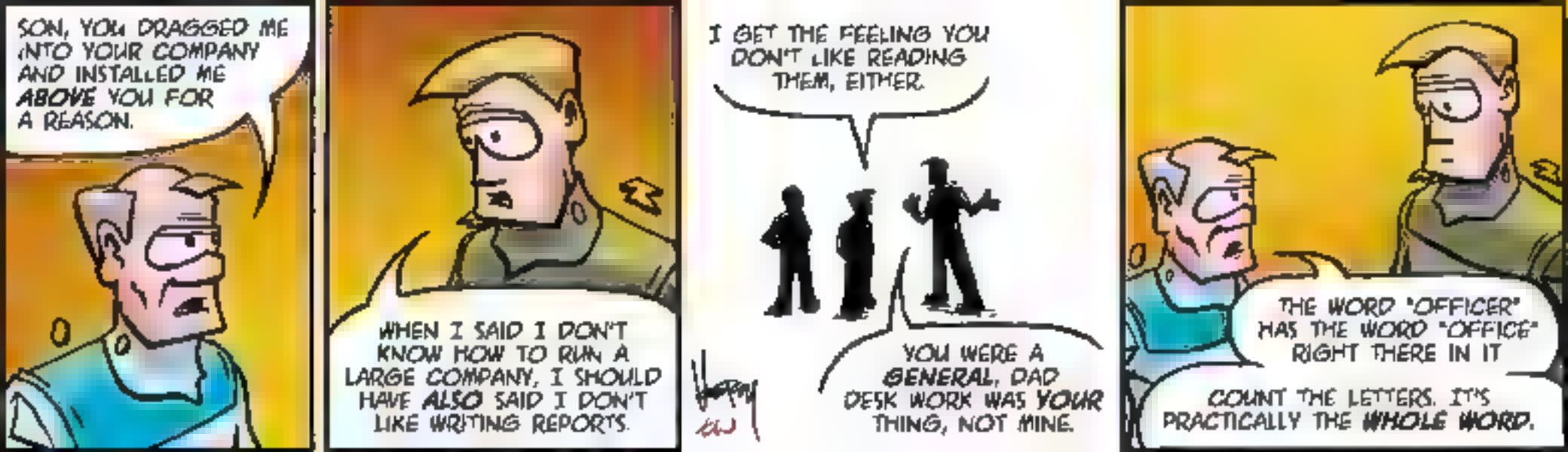
I can see that. They'll outperform any of their siblings.

ON ANY TASK EXCEPT DENT RESISTANCE.

SO USE THE OTHER BOATS FOR ALL YOUR RAMMING NEEDS.


I don't have very many of those, but I'm running sims now...
Sacrificing the PTU hull for performance and payload is astronomically unlikely to result in an increase in the number of scenarios where I need to begin ramming things with my boots.
OKAY, I'LL BITE.
WHEN DO YOU WANT TO RAM THINGS WITH YOUR BOATS?
As a Faint, when I wish to appear both desperate and stupid.
It's a great way to convince enemies that I lack the ability to ram them with little things like missiles, and high-energy protons.

ABOARD THE FLAGSHIP BROKEN WIND.
YOU'VE HAD A DAY FOR AFTER-ACTION REPORTS. WAS THAT ENOUGH?
WE REPLENISHED EXPENDED MUNITIONS, RESTOCKED THE FABBERS, AND GOT TWO NEW BOATS.
GOOD WHAT ABOUT AFTER-ACTION REPORTS?
THAT WAS THE REPORT


SON, YOU DRAGGED ME INTO YOUR COMPANY AND INSTALLED ME ABOVE YOU FOR A REASON.
WHEN I SAID I DON'T KNOW HOW TO RUN A LARGE COMPANY, I SHOULD HAVE ALSO SAID I DON'T LIKE WRITING REPORTS.
I GET THE FEELING YOU DON'T LIKE READING THEM, EITHER.
YOU WERE A GENERAL, DAD DESK WORK WAS YOUR THING, NOT MINE.
THE WORD "OFFICER" HAS THE WORD "OFFICE" RIGHT THERE IN IT
COUNT THE LETTERS. IT'S PRACTICALLY THE WHOLE WORD.

WHEN CAPTAIN MURTAUGH FINISHED HER DOM ATLANTIS DEPLOYMENT SHE PROVIDED ME WITH TWENTY THOUSAND WORDS OF AFTER-ACTION REPORTING.
HOW COULD SHE POSSIBLY WRITE THAT MUCH?
WRITER'S TRICK SHE DIDN'T USE TWENTY THOUSAND DIFFERENT WORDS.
I DON'T HAVE YOUR REPORT, EITHER, ANDREYASN. BE SURE TO INCLUDE THE WORDS "LOOTING," "ALLY'S" AND "BARRACKS."

OH, AND I NEED TO KNOW WHETHER YOUR TROOPS NEED TIME TO COOL OFF BEFORE WE DEPLOY AGAIN.
THE ONLY WAY THEY COOL OFF IS BY DEPOSITING ENERGY ON THEIR SURROUNDINGS
I'M ASKING AFTER YOUR TROOPS, CAPTAIN ANDREYASN. NOT SOME THERMODYNAMIC WHATSIT
I KNOW THAT
THEN GIVE ME A STRAIGHT ANSWER
IF MY TROOPS NEED TO DEPOSIT EXCESS ENERGY ON SOMETHING, I WANT IT TO BE THE ENEMY
I TRAINED HIM WELL.

I NEED THOROUGH REPORTS FROM **BOTH** OF YOU, **ASAP**.

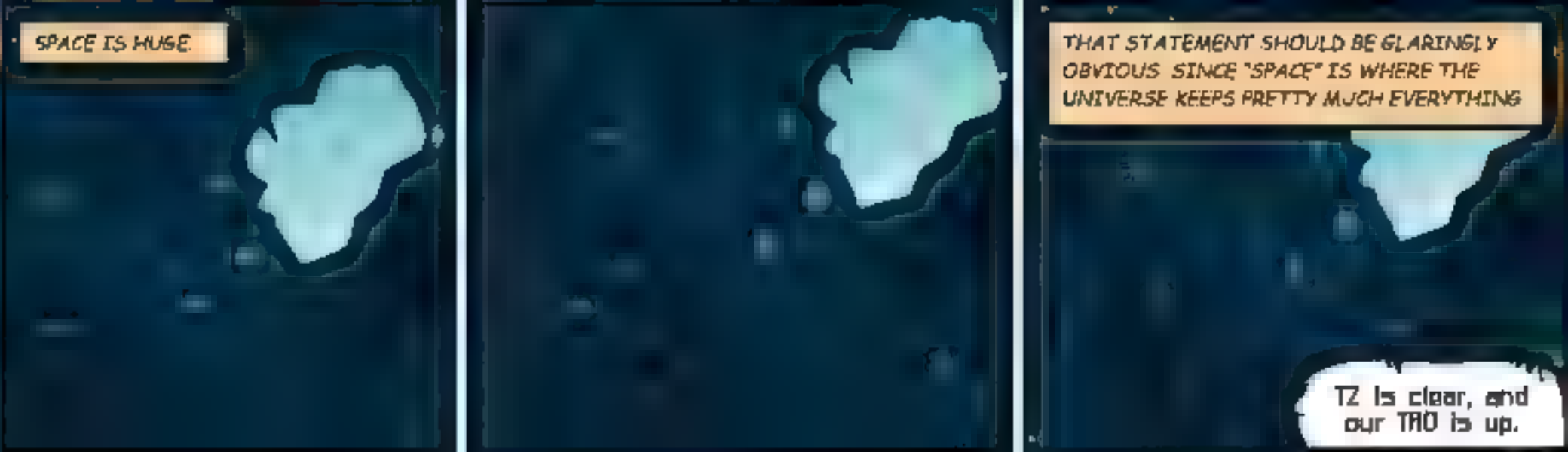
WE CANNOT DEPLOY ON OUR **NEXT** MISSION UNTIL WE'VE REVIEWED THE COMPANY'S PERFORMANCE DURING THE **LAST** ONE.

Sirs, I've probed the approaches to our destination. Lots of TAD. We'll be en route for at least 500 hours.

THAT GIVES US THREE WEEKS, RIGHT? CAN WE HAVE THREE WEEKS?

YOU CAN HAVE THREE **HOURS**, AND THEN I BREAK OUT THE STRONG LANGUAGE

THE COMMODORE SAID YOU MIGHT NEED HELP WRITING AN AFTER-ACTION REPORT
WHAT KIND OF HELP ARE YOU OFFERING, LIEUTENANT FLINDERS?
START TALKING. I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE REST
REALLY?
I SPENT YEARS AS AN OFFICE-FLAVORED OFFICER
CAN YOU MAKE MY REPORT SHINE THE WAY CAPTAIN MURTAUGH'S DID?
DUNNO. I HAD A LOT MORE TIME WHEN I WROTE HERS.


SPACE IS HUGE.
THAT STATEMENT SHOULD BE GLARINGLY OBVIOUS SINCE "SPACE" IS WHERE THE UNIVERSE KEEPS PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING
TZ is clear, and our TAO is up.

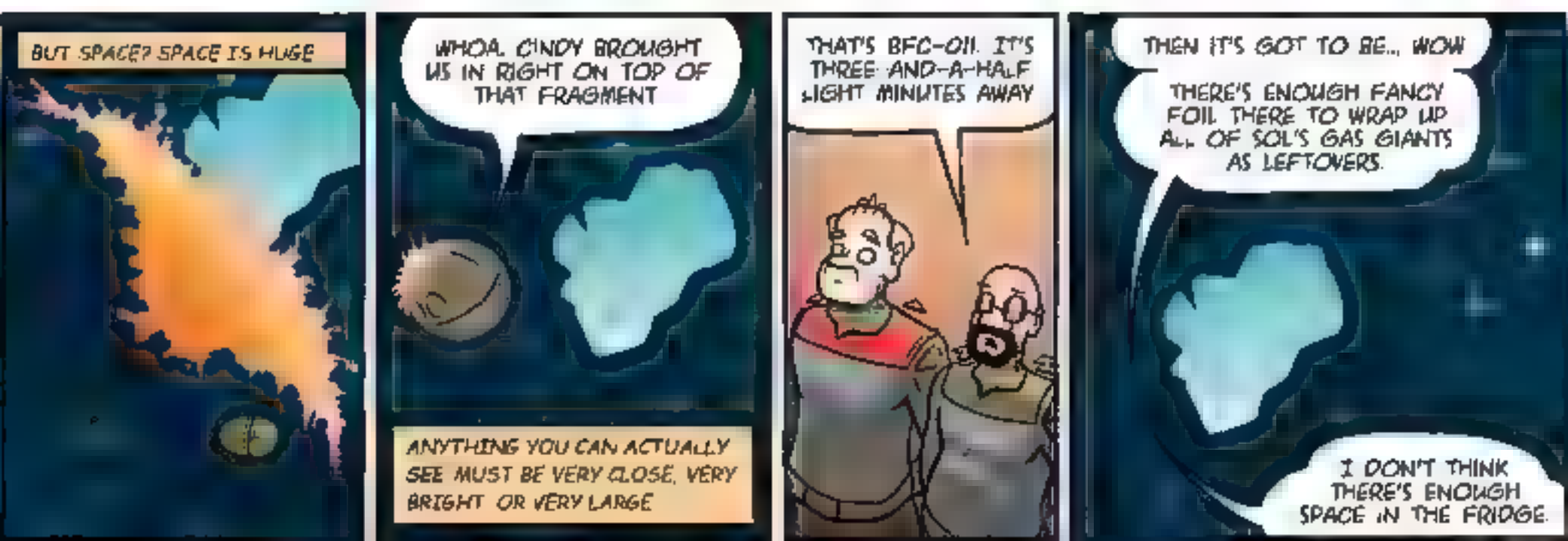
THIS RAISES AN INTERESTING QUESTION: WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DOES THE UNIVERSE STORE OUTSIDE OF SPACE?

TAKE US IN, IAFA.

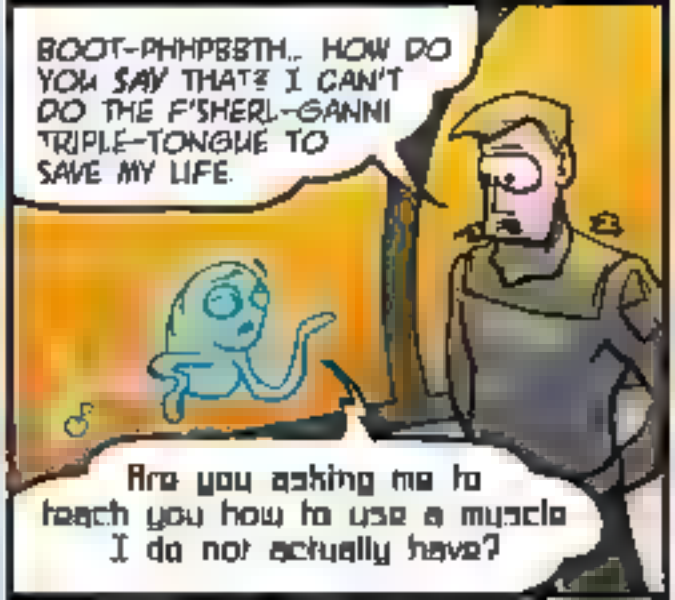
We're in.

CINDERCONE, GO.

OF COURSE THAT QUESTION RAISES A HOST OF OTHERS. LIKE "WHAT IS THE UNIVERSE," "WHY DOES IT NEED TO KEEP ANYTHING," AND "ISN'T ANTHROPOMORPHIZATION OF THE UNIVERSE GOING TO CAUSE PROBLEMS?"

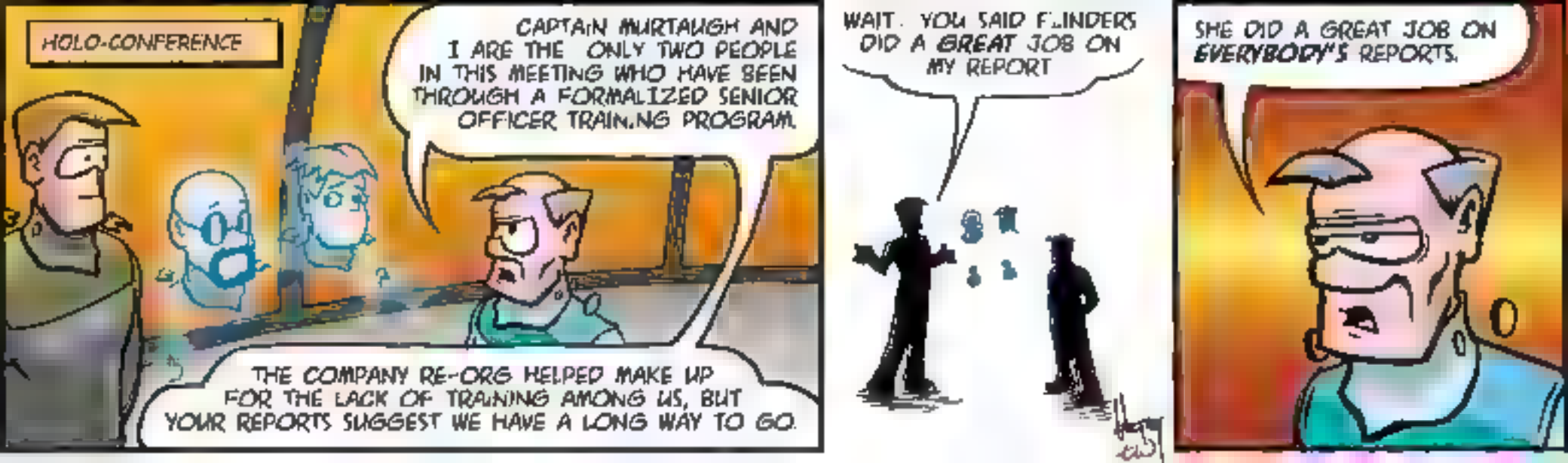

BUT SPACE? SPACE IS HUGE
WHOA. CINDY BROUGHT US IN RIGHT ON TOP OF THAT FRAGMENT
ANYTHING YOU CAN ACTUALLY SEE MUST BE VERY CLOSE, VERY BRIGHT OR VERY LARGE
THAT'S BFC-011. IT'S THREE-AND-A-HALF LIGHT MINUTES AWAY
THEN IT'S GOT TO BE... WOW
THERE'S ENOUGH FANCY FOIL THERE TO WRAP UP ALL OF SOL'S GAS GIANTS AS LEFTOVERS.
I DON'T THINK THERE'S ENOUGH SPACE IN THE FRIDGE.

BFT-011 is the largest single fragment of the balloon that used to surround the star Buu'l'p'l-Gav.

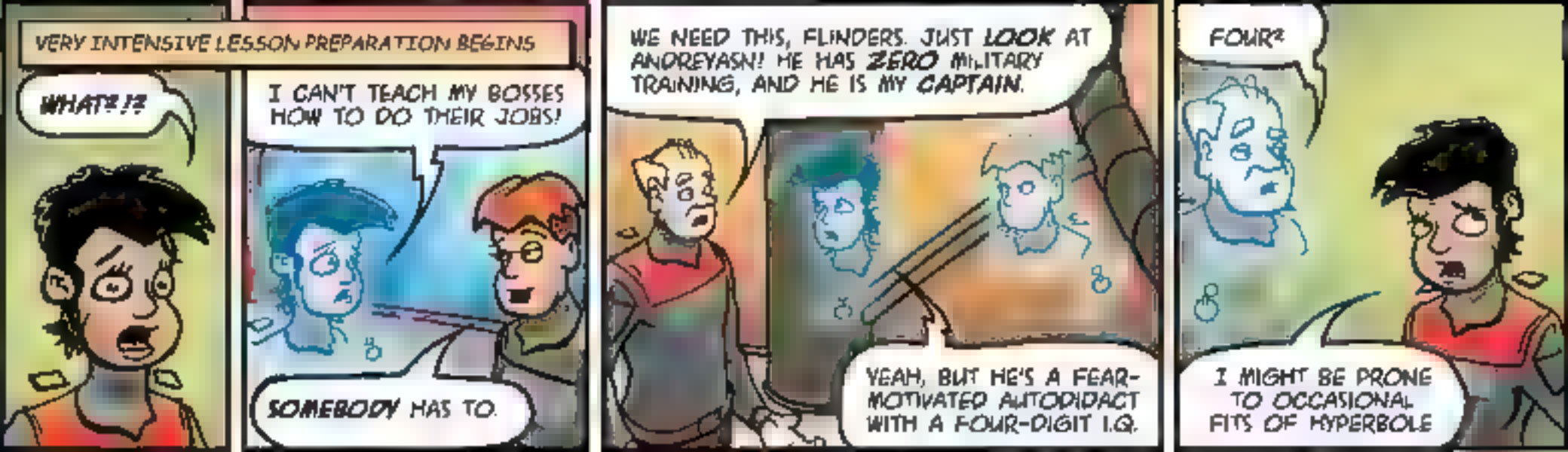

BOOT-PHHPBBTH... HOW DO YOU SAY THAT? I CAN'T DO THE F'SHERL-GANNI TRIPLE-TONGUE TO SAVE MY LIFE.
Are you asking me to teach you how to use a muscle I do not actually have?

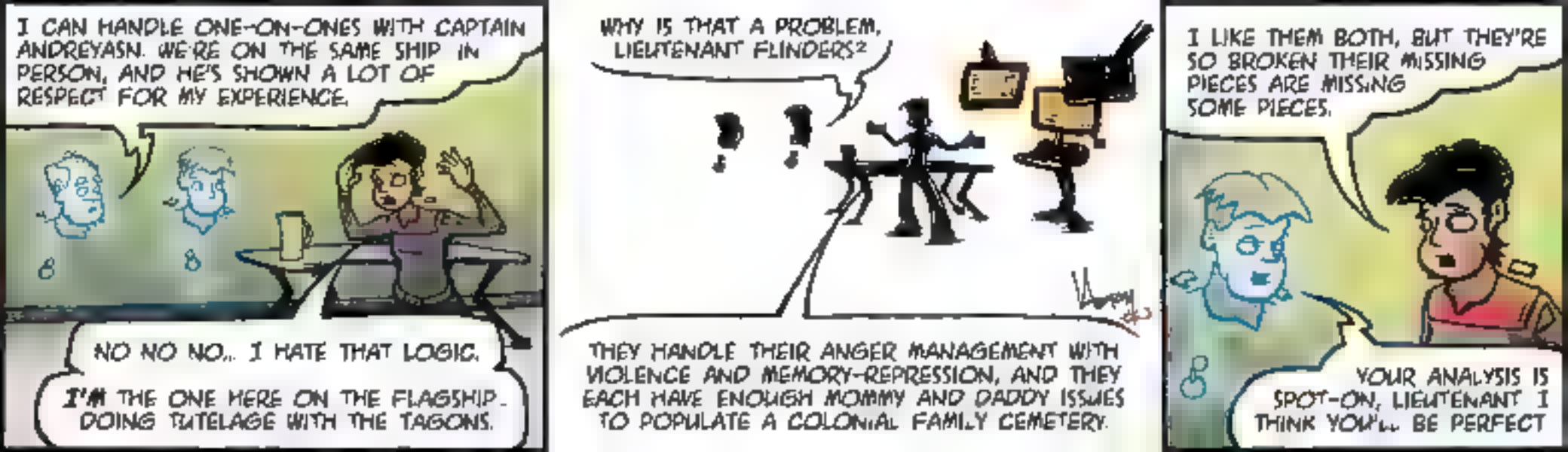
THAT'D BE WEIRD.
NO WEIRDER THAN HUMILITY

IAFA, PATCH CAPTAINS MURTAUGH AND ANDREYASN IN. QUICK MEETING
Yes, Commodore.
WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, DAD?
MY REVIEW OF YOUR AFTER-ACTION REPORTS.
YOU MADE US WRITE THEM, AND NOW WE HAVE TO LISTEN TO YOU READ THEM?
YOURS WAS VERY WELL WRITTEN. I THINK IT IS SOME OF LIEUTENANT FLINDERS' BEST WORK

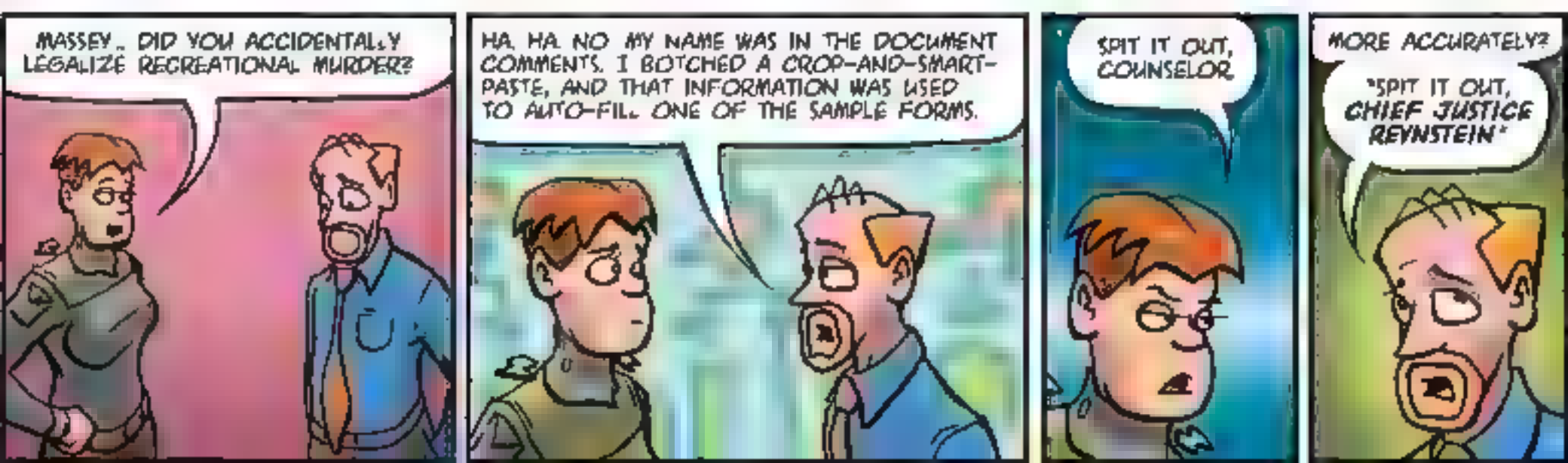

HOLO-CONFERENCE
CAPTAIN MURTAUGH AND I ARE THE ONLY TWO PEOPLE IN THIS MEETING WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH A FORMALIZED SENIOR OFFICER TRAINING PROGRAM.
THE COMPANY RE-ORG HELPED MAKE UP FOR THE LACK OF TRAINING AMONG US, BUT YOUR REPORTS SUGGEST WE HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO.
WAIT. YOU SAID FLINDERS DID A GREAT JOB ON MY REPORT
SHE DID A GREAT JOB ON EVERYBODY'S REPORTS.

THE SOLUTION IS OBVIOUS. WE NEED TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL.
CAPTAIN MURTAUGH, LIEUTENANT FLINDERS, AND CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER THURL WILL BE OUR INSTRUCTORS FOR AN INTENSIVE TWO-WEEK COURSE. CLASSES START IN TWO DAYS.
COMMODORE, THIS IS THE FIRST I'VE HEARD ABOUT THIS. WE DON'T HAVE COURSE MATERIALS.
THEN THE NEXT FORTY-EIGHT HOURS ARE GOING TO BE VERY INTENSIVE FOR YOU, FLINDERS, AND THURL.

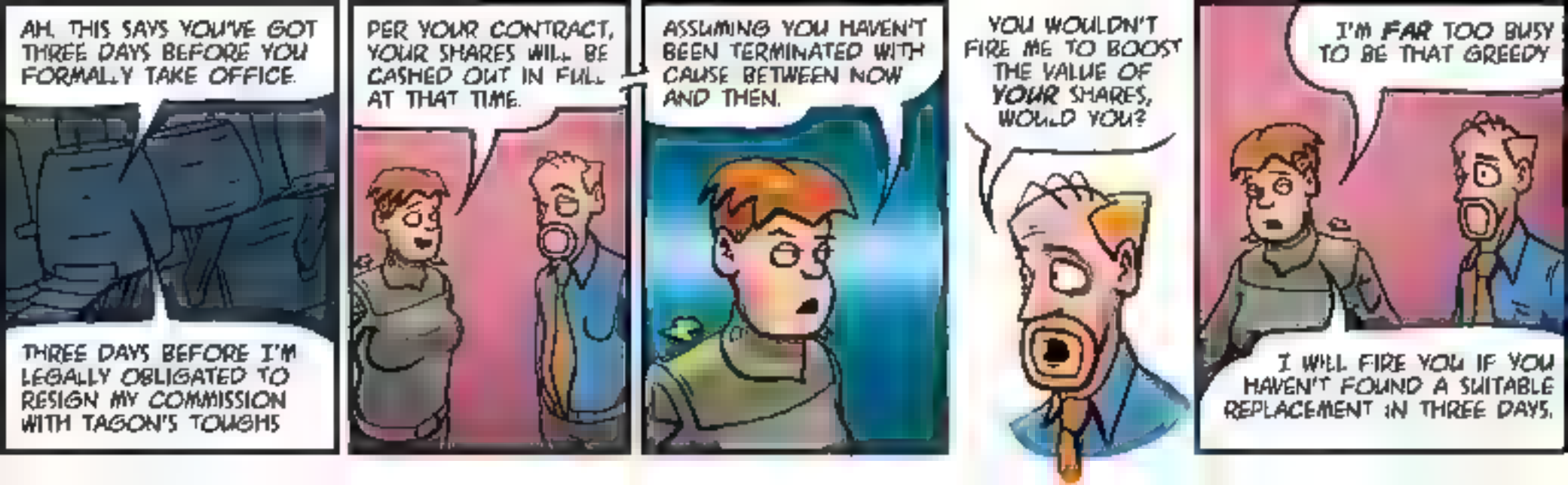

VERY INTENSIVE LESSON PREPARATION BEGINS
WHAT?!?
I CAN'T TEACH MY BOSSES HOW TO DO THEIR JOBS!
SOMEBODY HAS TO.
WE NEED THIS, FLINDERS. JUST LOOK AT ANDREYASN! HE HAS ZERO MILITARY TRAINING, AND HE IS MY CAPTAIN.
YEAH, BUT HE'S A FEAR-MOTIVATED AUTODIDACT WITH A FOUR-DIGIT I.Q.
FOUR?
I MIGHT BE PRONE TO OCCASIONAL FITS OF HYPERBOLE


I CAN HANDLE ONE-ON-ONES WITH CAPTAIN ANDREYASN. WE'RE ON THE SAME SHIP IN PERSON, AND HE'S SHOWN A LOT OF RESPECT FOR MY EXPERIENCE.
NO NO NO... I HATE THAT LOGIC.
I'M THE ONE HERE ON THE FLAGSHIP. DOING TUTELAGE WITH THE TAGONS.
WHY IS THAT A PROBLEM, LIEUTENANT FLINDERS?
THEY HANDLE THEIR ANGER MANAGEMENT WITH VIOLENCE AND MEMORY-REPRESSION, AND THEY EACH HAVE ENOUGH MOMMY AND DADDY ISSUES TO POPULATE A COLONIAL FAMILY CEMETERY.
I LIKE THEM BOTH, BUT THEY'RE SO BROKEN THEIR MISSING PIECES ARE MISSING SOME PIECES.
YOUR ANALYSIS IS SPOT-ON, LIEUTENANT I THINK YOU'LL BE PERFECT

TT-POD 1 JUMPSTAR PRIME
CAPTAIN MURTAUGH, WE HAVE A PROBLEM.
I HANDED A DRAFT CONSTITUTION TO THE COUNCIL. THEY RATIFIED IT WITHOUT MAKING CHANGES.
YOUR DRAFTS ARE CLEAN. LIEUTENANT GOOD WORK
THIS ONE WAS NOT CLEAN. IT HAD... "SHRAPNEL" IN IT
FROM EDITING.


MASSEY.. DID YOU ACCIDENTALLY LEGALIZE RECREATIONAL MURDER?
HA. HA. NO. MY NAME WAS IN THE DOCUMENT COMMENTS. I BOTCHED A CROP-AND-SMART-PASTE, AND THAT INFORMATION WAS USED TO AUTO-FILL ONE OF THE SAMPLE FORMS.
SPIT IT OUT, COUNSELOR.
MORE ACCURATELY?
"SPIT IT OUT, CHIEF JUSTICE REYNSTEIN."

SANCTUM MAIORI EXCREMENTUM.
OKAY MASSEY, WE CAN FIX THIS. EASILY. JUST TELL THE COUNCIL YOU MADE A MISTAKE.
I DID.
PROBATIONARY PRE-PRESIDENT UNUAIYYA SAID, AND I QUOTE, "NO MISTAKE."
WE HAVE A PROBLEM.
ROBES. THEY'RE GOING TO MAKE ME WEAR ROBES


AH. THIS SAYS YOU'VE GOT THREE DAYS BEFORE YOU FORMALLY TAKE OFFICE.
THREE DAYS BEFORE I'M LEGALLY OBLIGATED TO RESIGN MY COMMISSION WITH TAGON'S TOUGHS
PER YOUR CONTRACT, YOUR SHARES WILL BE CASHED OUT IN FULL AT THAT TIME.
ASSUMING YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TERMINATED WITH CAUSE BETWEEN NOW AND THEN.
YOU WOULDN'T FIRE ME TO BOOST THE VALUE OF YOUR SHARES, WOULD YOU?
I'M FAR TOO BUSY TO BE THAT GREEDY
I WILL FIRE YOU IF YOU HAVEN'T FOUND A SUITABLE REPLACEMENT IN THREE DAYS.

ENNESBY, I NEED YOUR HELP
I HAVE TO RESIGN, BUT I WILL LOSE MY EXTREMELY VALUABLE SHARES IF I CAN'T HIRE REPLACEMENT COUNSEL FOR THE COMPANY... IN THREE DAYS.
You need my "Sophont Resources" expertise?
NO.
I NEED YOU TO DIGEST A FEW LAW LIBRARIES.
IF I had a digestive tract, it would strenuously object
OBJECTION OVERRULED SPECULATION.

You told that joke wrong.

"Objection overruled" shouldn't be followed by valid grounds for the objection.

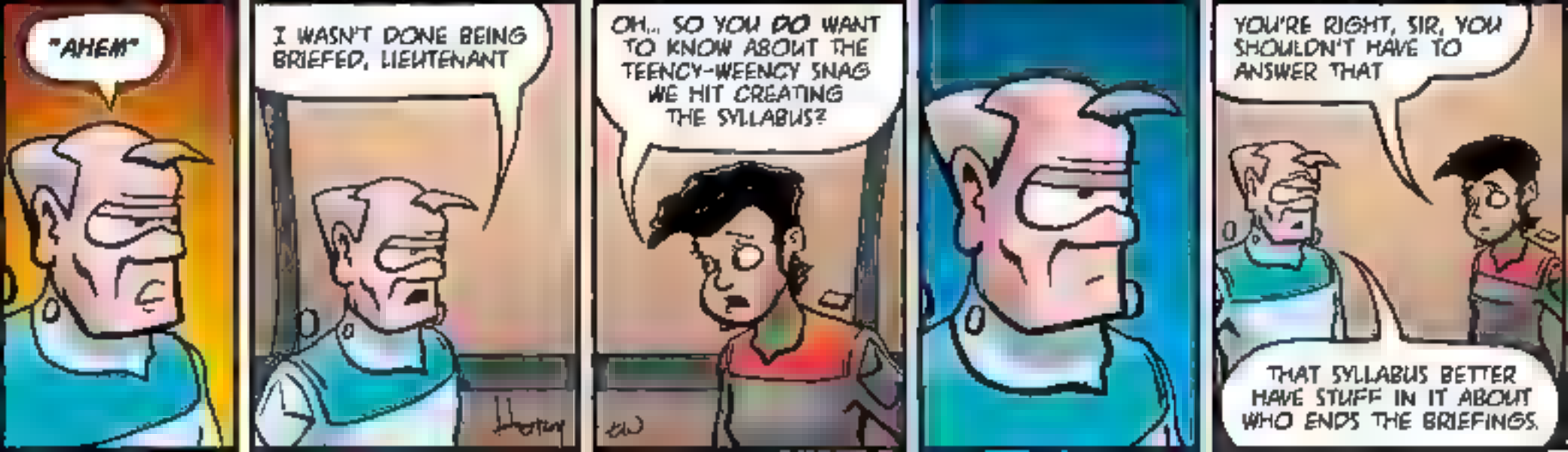
Your punchline conflated the roles of counsel and bench, which might have resulted in confusion rather than laughter

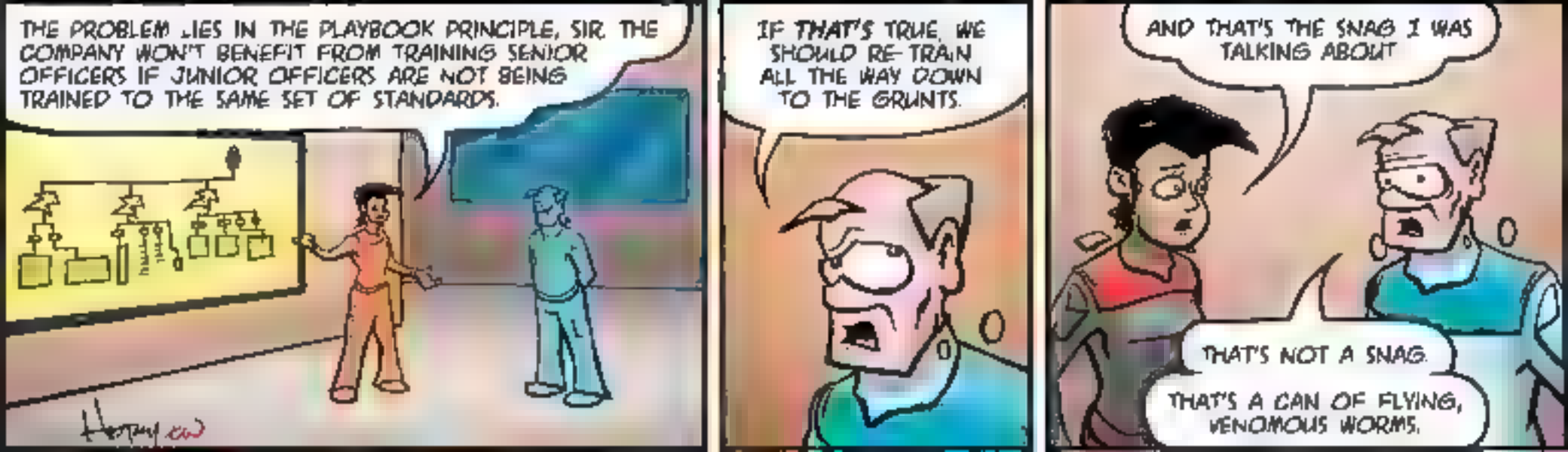
Oh. You did that on purpose, and tricked me into an off-the-cuff display of legal acumen, proving that I can do this job.

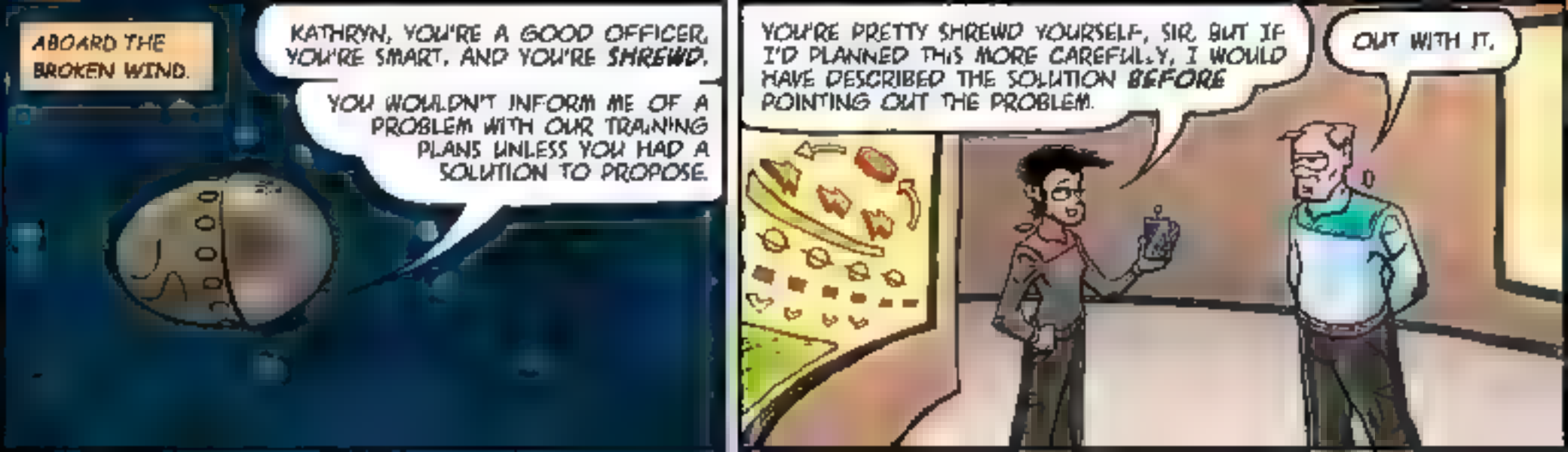
THE PROSECUTION RESTS. YOU'RE HIRED.

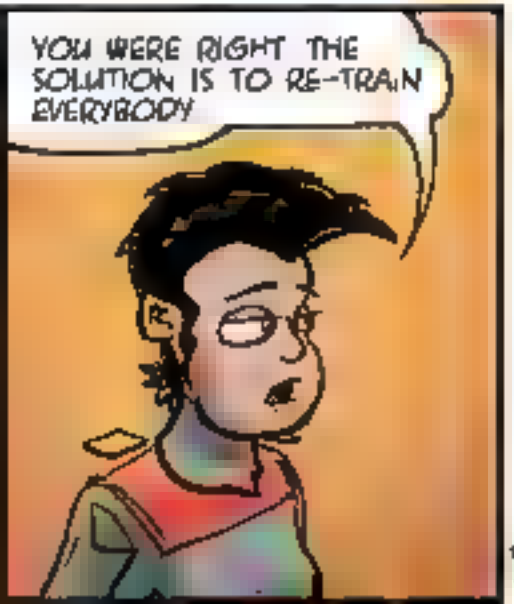
And you did it again.

ABOARD THE FLAGSHIP
COMMODORE, WE'VE HIT A SNAG WITH THE OFFICER TRAINING SYLLABUS.
WILL CLASSES START ON SCHEDULE TOMORROW?
YES, SIR. ABSOLUTELY.
THEN I'M NOT WORRIED
WHEW! GOOD
WE'LL SEE YOU TOMORROW, IN CLASS.
HULLNUTS.
NOW I AM WORRIED.


"AHEM"
I WASN'T DONE BEING BRIEFED, LIEUTENANT
OH... SO YOU DO WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE TEENCY-WEENCY SNAG WE HIT CREATING THE SYLLABUS?
YOU'RE RIGHT, SIR, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TO ANSWER THAT
THAT SYLLABUS BETTER HAVE STUFF IN IT ABOUT WHO ENDS THE BRIEFINGS.


THE PROBLEM LIES IN THE PLAYBOOK PRINCIPLE, SIR. THE COMPANY WON'T BENEFIT FROM TRAINING SENIOR OFFICERS IF JUNIOR OFFICERS ARE NOT BEING TRAINED TO THE SAME SET OF STANDARDS.
IF THAT'S TRUE, WE SHOULD RE-TRAIN ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE GRUNTS.
AND THAT'S THE SNAG I WAS TALKING ABOUT
THAT'S NOT A SNAG.
THAT'S A CAN OF FLYING, VENOMOUS WORMS.

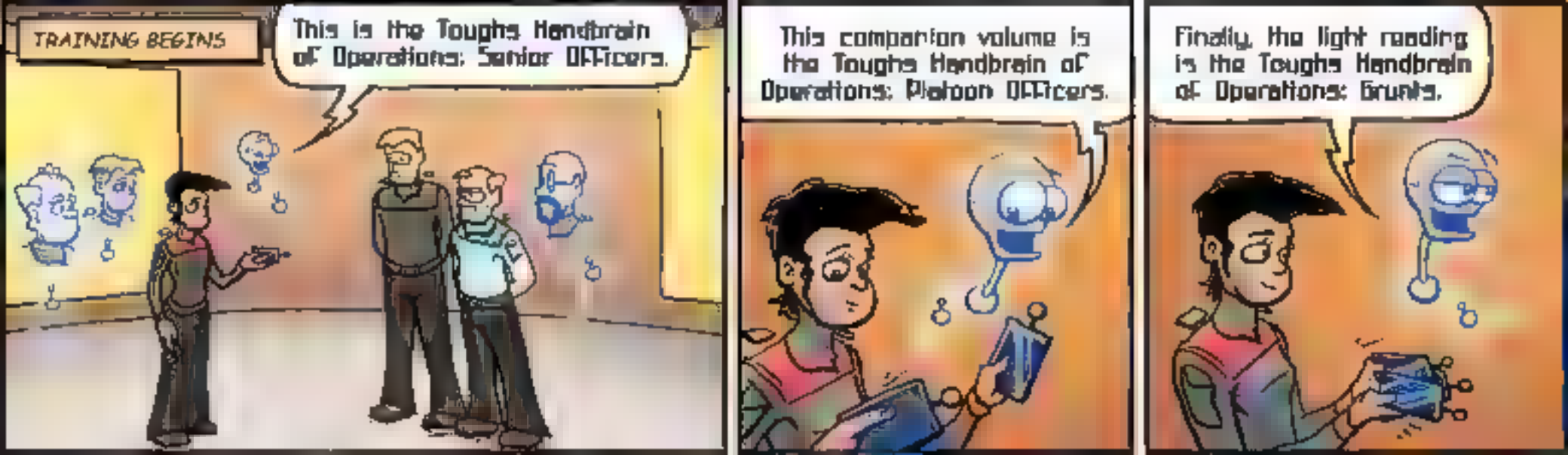

ABOARD THE BROKEN WIND.
KATHRYN, YOU'RE A GOOD OFFICER. YOU'RE SMART, AND YOU'RE SHREWD.
YOU WOULDN'T INFORM ME OF A PROBLEM WITH OUR TRAINING PLANS UNLESS YOU HAD A SOLUTION TO PROPOSE.
YOU'RE PRETTY SHREWD YOURSELF, SIR. BUT IF I'D PLANNED THIS MORE CAREFULLY, I WOULD HAVE DESCRIBED THE SOLUTION BEFORE POINTING OUT THE PROBLEM.
OUT WITH IT.

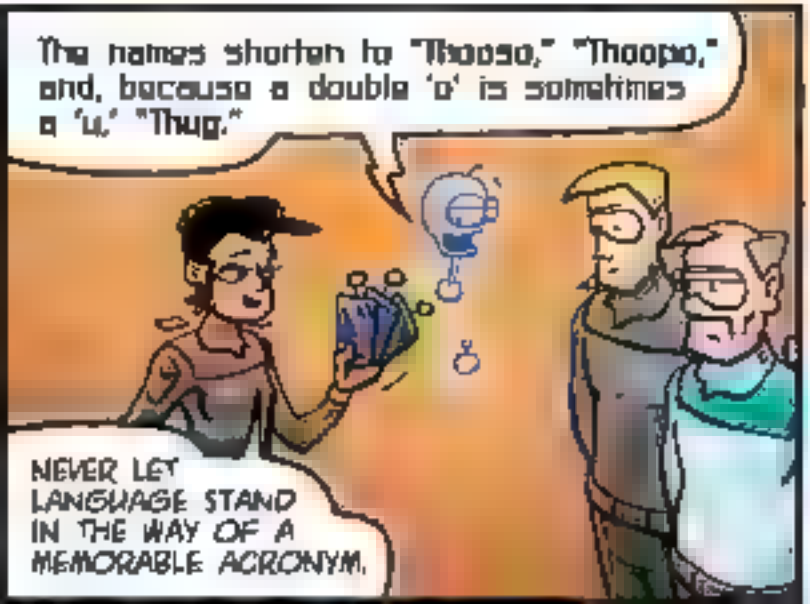

YOU WERE RIGHT. THE SOLUTION IS TO RE-TRAIN EVERYBODY.

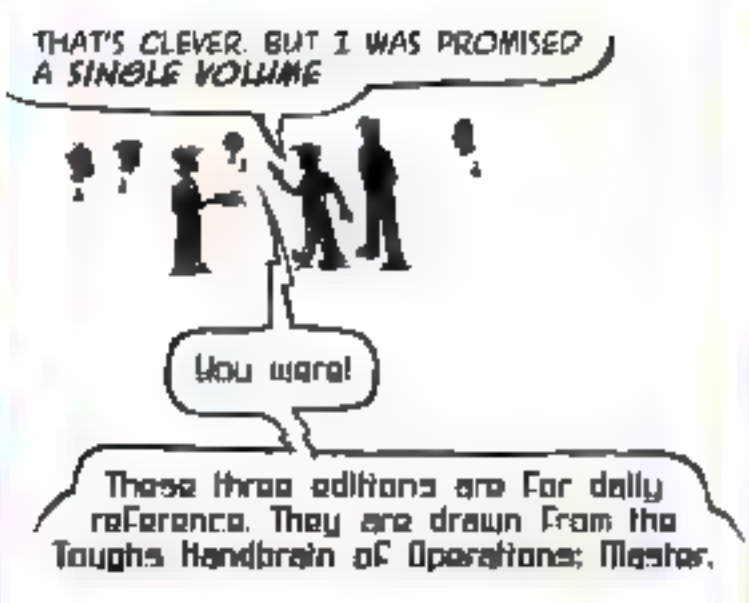
FORTUNATELY, WE DO NOT NEED TO START FROM SCRATCH.

WE'RE REVIEWING OUR CHARTER, OUR POLICY BOOKS, AND ALL OF OUR MANUALS, AND EDITING THEM FOR CONSISTENCY.
THEN WE'LL BUILD OUR TRAINING AROUND THE CHANGES, WHICH WE'RE KEEPING TO A MINIMUM.
THAT'S GOT TO BE A MILLION WORDS WORTH OF MATERIAL. HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY BE READY TO START TRAINING TOMORROW?

ENNESBY OFFERED HIS SERVICES. HE'S FAST, AND HE IS ANXIOUS TO PLEASE THE SENIOR OFFICERS.
BESIDES, AS OUR NEW LEGAL COUNSEL, ENNESBY WOULD HAVE BEEN REVIEWING THESE MATERIALS ANYWAY
WHAT? WHY DO WE NEED NEW LEGAL COUNSEL? WHAT HAPPENED TO MASSEY?
YOU JUST PRESENTED THE SOLUTION BEFORE DESCRIBING THE PROBLEM.
IT SEEMED PRUDENT
ALSO, THAT PROCEDURE IS GOING INTO THE NEW MANUAL


TRAINING BEGINS
This is the Toughs Handbrain of Operations: Senior Officers.
This companion volume is the Toughs Handbrain of Operations: Platoon Officers.
Finally, the light reading is the Toughs Handbrain of Operations: Grunts.


The names shorten to "Thoopo," "Thoopo," and, because a double 'o' is sometimes a 'u,' "Thug."
NEVER LET LANGUAGE STAND IN THE WAY OF A MEMORABLE ACRONYM.


THAT'S CLEVER. BUT I WAS PROMISED A SINGLE VOLUME
You were!
These three editions are for daily reference. They are drawn from the Toughs Handbrain of Operations; Master.

THOOM, if you will.
WELL PLAYED
I THINK WE ALL WILL.

Everything our company does is documented in the THOOM. It guides us on what we do well, and aligns us so we can do it better.

WHAT ABOUT THE THINGS WE DO *WRONG?*

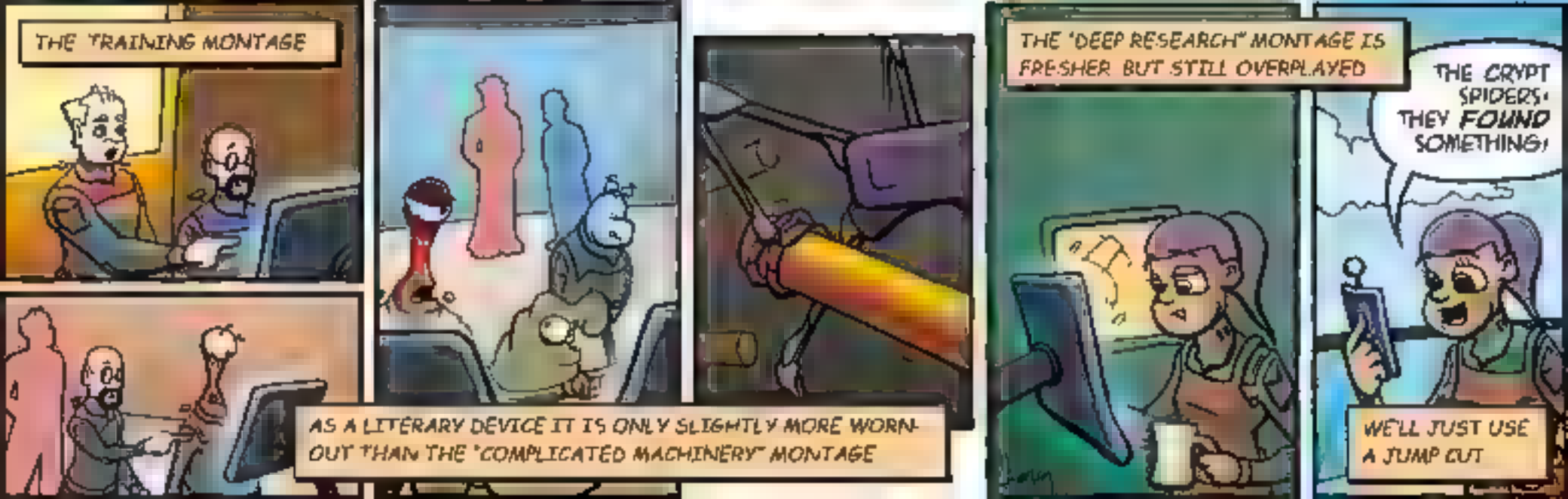
I put all of the requisite corrections into the THOOM

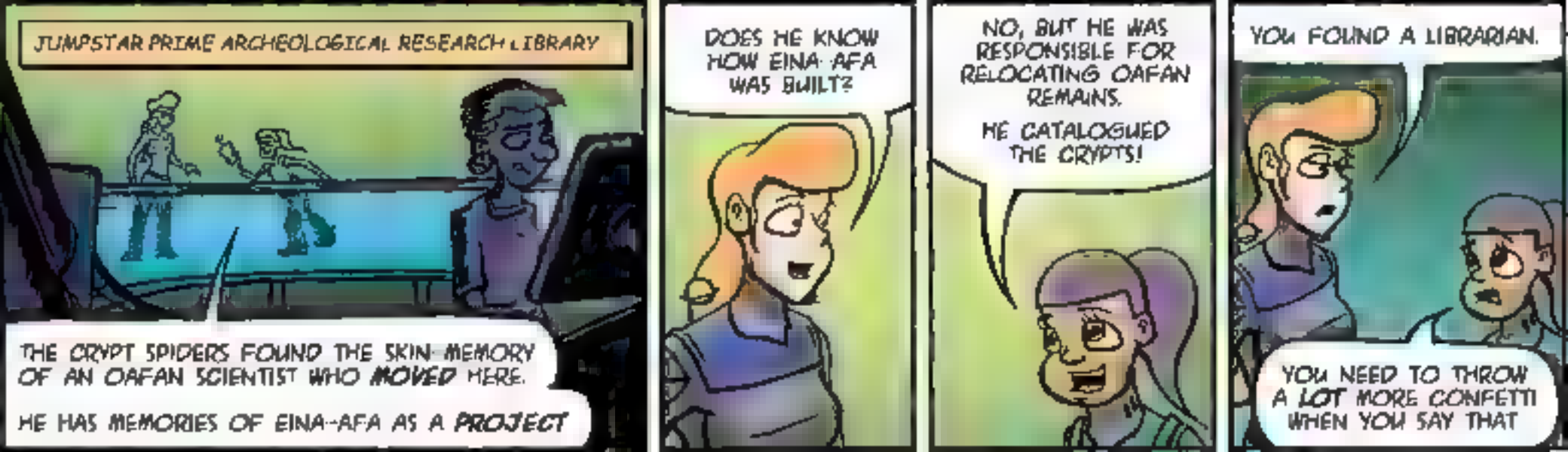
It's up to your instructors to deliver that unpleasantness.

DOES THE *THOOM* GIVE HIM PERMISSION TO ABANDON YOU THE MOMENT YOU HEAD INTO HOSTILE TERRITORY?

I'M SURE HE SNUCK THAT CLAUSE IN THERE SOMEWHERE.

WE'LL BEGIN BY TRAINING YOU ON THE THOOPO. TOMORROW. WE WILL SHADOW YOU AS YOU TRAIN YOUR PLATOON OFFICERS ON THOSE MATERIALS.
WE'LL ADJUST FROM THERE, BUT THE PATTERN SHOULD HOLD. WE WILL TRAIN YOU, AND THEN WE WILL HELP YOU TRAIN THOSE UNDER YOUR COMMAND.
THIS IS GOING TO GET TEDIOUS.
WHEN YOU LOOK BACK ON IT ALL, THE HOURS WILL BLUR TOGETHER INTO A SINGLE, HAPPY TRAINING MONTAGE.


THE TRAINING MONTAGE
AS A LITERARY DEVICE IT IS ONLY SLIGHTLY MORE WORN-OUT THAN THE "COMPLICATED MACHINERY" MONTAGE
THE "DEEP RESEARCH" MONTAGE IS FRESHER BUT STILL OVERPLAYED
THE CRYPT SPIDERS! THEY FOUND SOMETHING!
WE'LL JUST USE A JUMP CUT

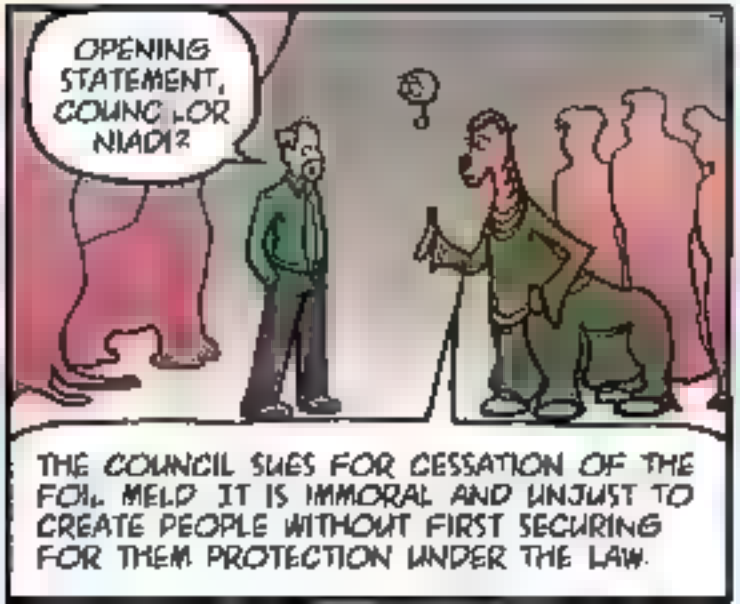

JUMPSTAR PRIME ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH LIBRARY
THE CRYPT SPIDERS FOUND THE SKIN-MEMORY OF AN OAFAN SCIENTIST WHO MOVED HERE.
HE HAS MEMORIES OF EINA-AFA AS A PROJECT
DOES HE KNOW HOW EINA-AFA WAS BUILT?
NO, BUT HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR RELOCATING OAFAN REMAINS.
HE CATALOGUED THE CRYPTS!
YOU FOUND A LIBRARIAN.
YOU NEED TO THROW A LOT MORE CONFETTI WHEN YOU SAY THAT

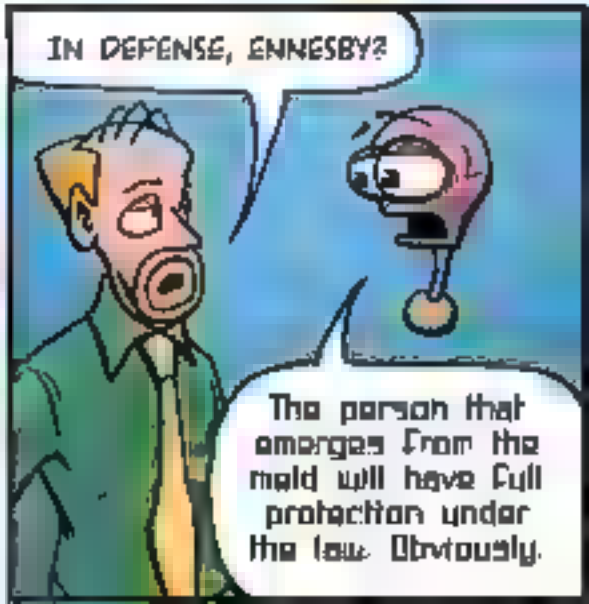
I LIKE LIBRARIANS. THEY'RE VERY HELPFUL.
BUT YOU'RE EXCITED ABOUT FINDING A DEAD ONE.
FOR NOW
YOU'RE EXCITED FOR NOW, OR..
DEAD FOR NOW
THE LAST OAFAN WHO HAD A MEMORY SKIN TRANSPLANT EXPLODED INTO A SWARM OF KILLER BUGS.
I HEARD THAT THE BUGS WERE VERY HELPFUL

TWO DAYS LATER
I'M HERE COMMANDER. WHAT IS IT YOU NEED ME TO SEE?
NOT "SEE" WITNESS. WE'RE HAVING A TRIAL.
Councilor Miedi is suing to block the Foil molding of the librarian we found.
HER PEOPLE ARE PERFORMING THE OPERATION!
WHY IS THIS OUR PROBLEM?
I TAPPED YOUR COMPANY'S LEGAL COUNSEL TO ARGUE IN DEFENSE OF THE PROCEDURE

RESPECTFULLY, CHIEF JUSTICE REYNSTEIN,
WHAT IN THE HABEUS HANDBASKET ARE YOU DOING?
GETTING STARTED. SHHH..

COURT IS NOW IN SESSION.


OPENING STATEMENT, COUNCILOR NIADI?
THE COUNCIL SUES FOR CESSATION OF THE FOIL MELD. IT IS IMMORAL AND UNJUST TO CREATE PEOPLE WITHOUT FIRST SECURING FOR THEM PROTECTION UNDER THE LAW.


IN DEFENSE, ENNESBY?
The person that emerges from the meld will have full protection under the law. Obviously.

PER THE LIBERTY AND IDENTITY CLAUSE IN SECTION ONE OF THE EA-CC, THE COURT FINDS WITH THE DEFENSE. THE CREATURE EMERGING FROM THIS MELD WILL BE CONSIDERED A SOPHONT, AND GRANTED FULL INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES UNDER THE LAW.

COUNCILOR, IF THERE IS EXISTING LEGISLATION SUGGESTING OTHERWISE, THE COURT MANDATES THAT THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL REWRITE THOSE LAWS TO COMPLY WITH THIS JUDGEMENT

CASE CLOSED

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE LEGAL PROCESS.

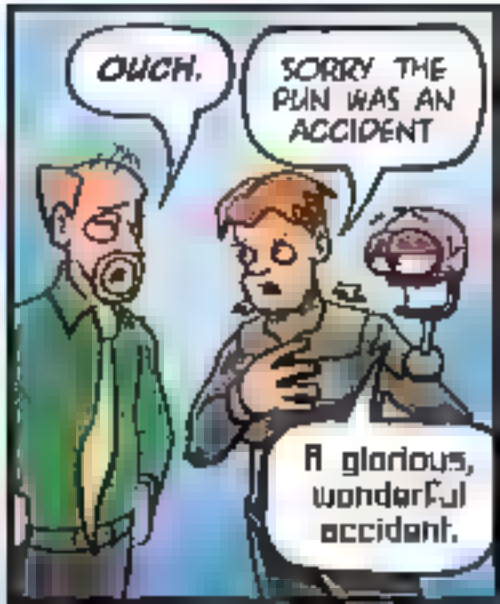
DID YOU JUST STAGE A TRIAL IN ORDER TO SET A PRECEDENT?

THE RECORD WILL SHOW THAT WE SET MORE THAN JUST ONE PRECEDENT

He wouldn't let me wear a wig.

I USED TO LOVE THE TRAPPINGS OF A COURT IN SESSION.
THESE DAYS I SEE THE ROBES AND THE REST FOR WHAT THEY ARE..
THEATER.
IF "SECURITY THEATER" MAKES PEOPLE BELIEVE THEY'RE SAFE THEN "LEGAL THEATER" MAKES THEM BELIEVE THERE IS JUSTICE.
WE'RE BETTER OFF IF PEOPLE CAN SEE ACTUAL JUSTICE, AND THEN BELIEVE.

YOU'RE SETTING A PRETTY HIGH


OUCH.
SORRY THE RUN WAS AN ACCIDENT
A glorious, wonderful accident.

JUMPSTAR PRIME HOSPITAL, NEOAFAN PHYSIOLOGICAL RESEARCH POD
WHERE'S THIS ANCIENT LIBRARIAN YOU'RE RESUSCITATING? I WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE MY OWN AGE.

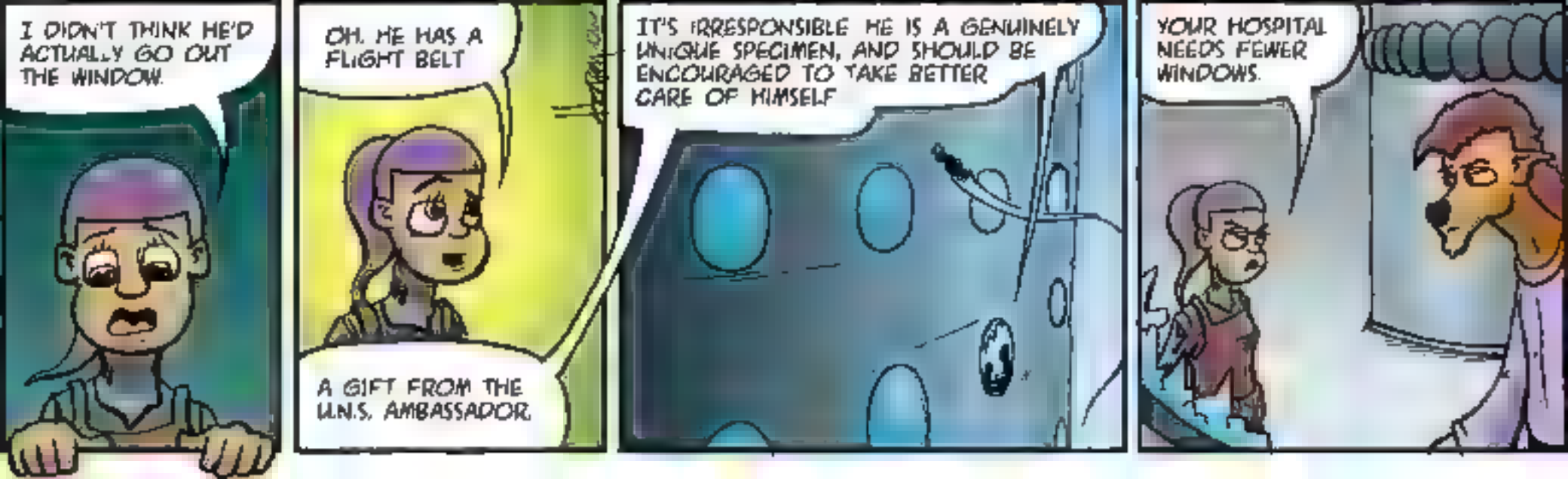
I THINK YOU MIGHT BE OLDER BY A COUPLE OF MILLION YEARS.
I DON'T MIND BEING OLDER. WHERE IS SHE?

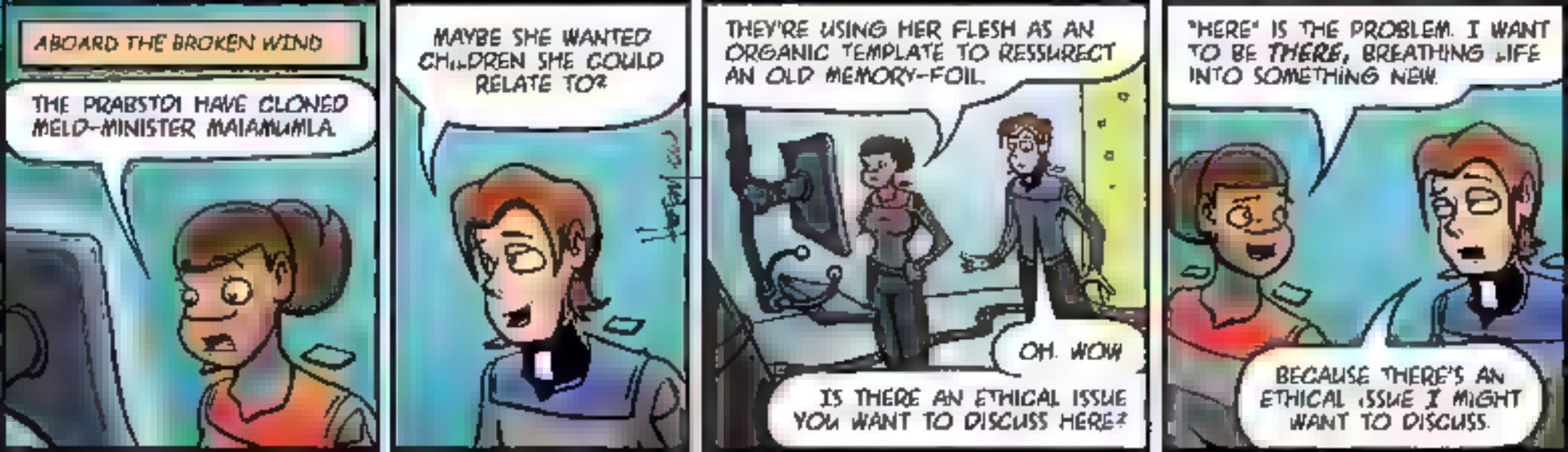
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BEING SMALLER?
IS SHE BEHIND THE BLIMP?

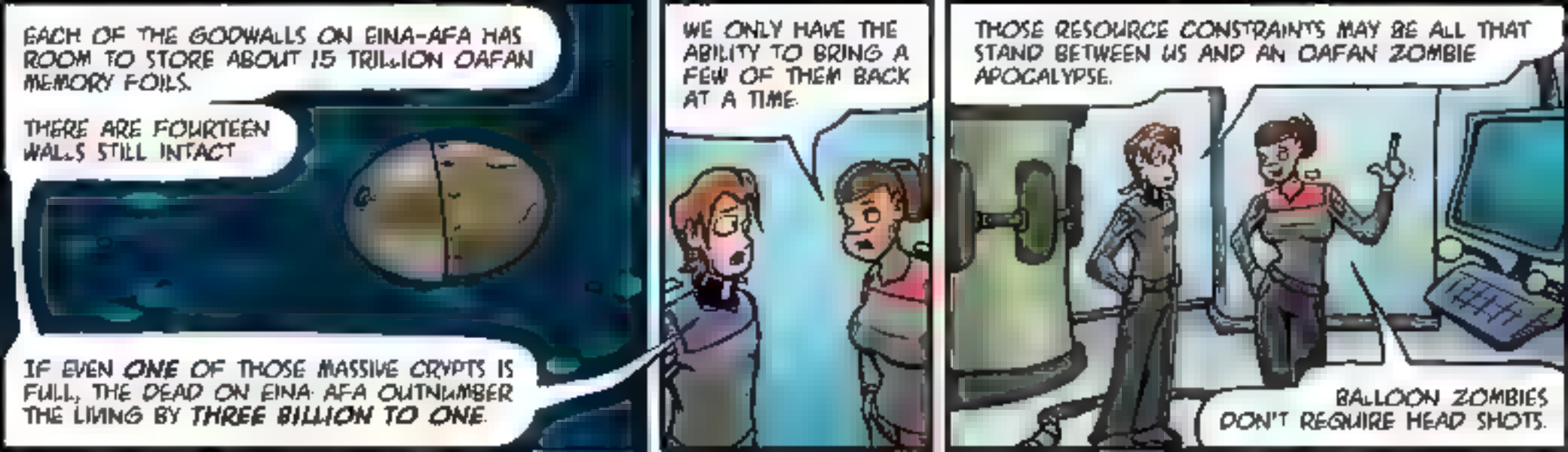
IT'S GOING TO BE A COUPLE OF DAYS, I THINK. THE PRABSTDI DOCTORS WOULD KNOW.

I'M NOT INTERESTED IN TALKING TO THEM.
THEY'RE VERY TOUCHY
TOUCHY HOW? I'VE ONLY EVER SEEN THEM BEING NICE.

HELLO IT'S SO VERY GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN CAN I TROUBLE YOU FOR A QUICK TISSUE SAMPLE IT WON'T TAKE EVEN ONE MINUTE PLEASE?
COVER ME I'M GOING OUT THE WINDOW


I DIDN'T THINK HE'D ACTUALLY GO OUT THE WINDOW.
OH. HE HAS A FLIGHT BELT
A GIFT FROM THE U.N.S. AMBASSADOR.
IT'S IRRESPONSIBLE. HE IS A GENUINELY UNIQUE SPECIMEN, AND SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE BETTER CARE OF HIMSELF.
YOUR HOSPITAL NEEDS FEWER WINDOWS.


ABOARD THE BROKEN WIND
THE PRABSTOI HAVE CLONED MELO-MINISTER MAIAMUMLA.
MAYBE SHE WANTED CHILDREN SHE COULD RELATE TO?
THEY'RE USING HER FLESH AS AN ORGANIC TEMPLATE TO RESSURECT AN OLD MEMORY-FOIL.
OH. WOW
IS THERE AN ETHICAL ISSUE YOU WANT TO DISCUSS HERE?
"HERE" IS THE PROBLEM. I WANT TO BE THERE, BREATHING LIFE INTO SOMETHING NEW.
BECAUSE THERE'S AN ETHICAL ISSUE I MIGHT WANT TO DISCUSS.


EACH OF THE GODWALLS ON EINA-AFA HAS ROOM TO STORE ABOUT 15 TRILLION OAFAN MEMORY FOILS.
THERE ARE FOURTEEN WALLS STILL INTACT
IF EVEN ONE OF THOSE MASSIVE CRYPTS IS FULL, THE DEAD ON EINA-AFA OUTNUMBER THE LIVING BY THREE BILLION TO ONE.
WE ONLY HAVE THE ABILITY TO BRING A FEW OF THEM BACK AT A TIME.
THOSE RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS MAY BE ALL THAT STAND BETWEEN US AND AN OAFAN ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE.
BALLOON ZOMBIES DON'T REQUIRE HEAD SHOTS.

THE MERCENARY WARSHIP BROKEN WIND CLOSES ON BFC 618-014

THE "BFC" STANDS FOR "BUUTHANDI FRAGMENT CATALOG" AND THERE ARE FAR TOO MANY FRAGMENTS TO BOTHER GIVING THEM ALL NAMES.

THIS "SCRAP" OF BUUTHANDI FABRIC IS 19,100 KILOMETERS ACROSS, AND HAS JUST ONE HABITAT IN TOW.

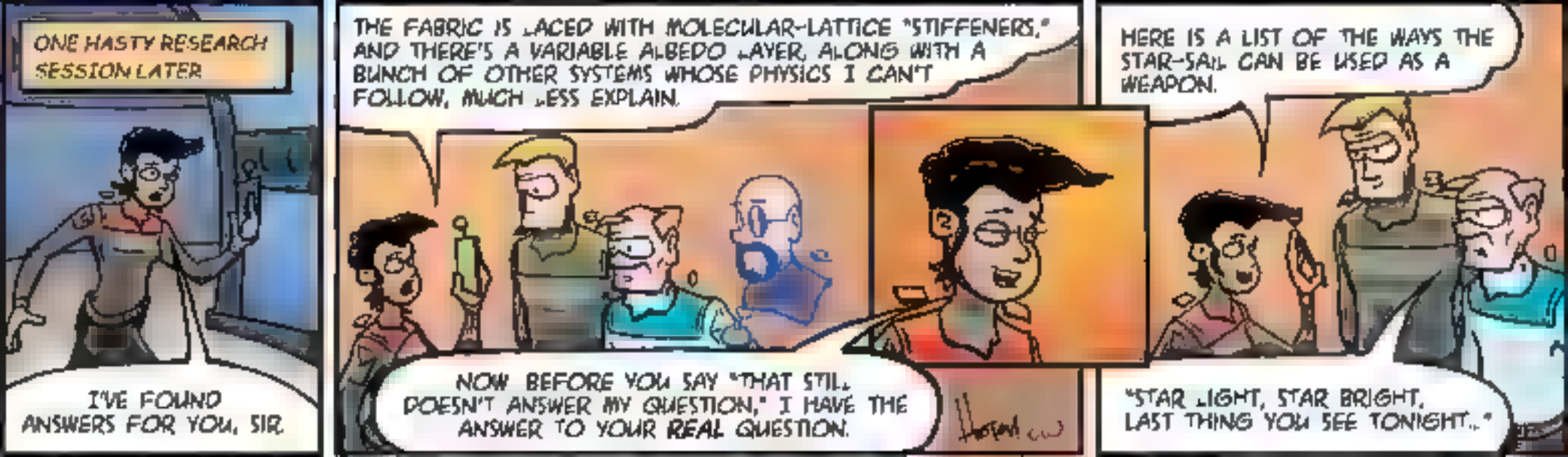
THE HABITAT STILL HAS FULL POWER, ROTATING TO PROVIDE GRAVITY AT 6/X OF EARTH'S. THIS HAB HAS NO ANNIE-PLANTS, AND WE HAVEN'T IDENTIFIED ANY WEAPONS-GRADE POWER SIGNATURES.

THERE MAY BE AS MANY AS 5,000 F'SHERL-GANNI ABOARD. WE CAN RELOCATE THEM, IF THAT'S WHAT THEY WANT. THEIR ARCHIVE IS SOMEWHERE IN THERE, AND IF WE'RE NICE, THEY'LL LET US LOOK AT IT.

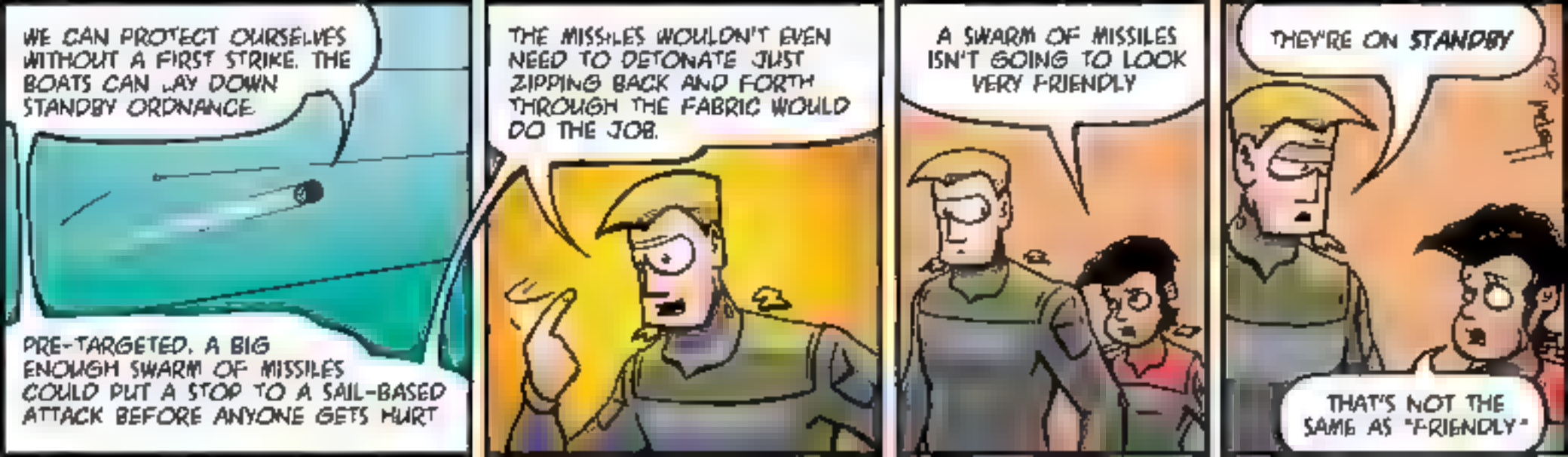
HOW CAN THAT TORN PIECE OF DYSON BALLOON ACTUALLY FUNCTION AS A PROPER SAIL?
STAR-SAILS ARE COMPLICATED.
BUUTHANDI FABRIC IS CRAZY-COOL STUFF
IS THAT ANALYST-SPEAK FOR "I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE IT'S MAGIC?"

WHAT I HEARD WAS "I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS MISSION-CRITICAL, SO I DIDN'T STUDY IT, BUT I CAN GET MORE INFORMATION IF YOU WANT ME TO, SIR."

THAT EXCHANGE WASN'T WHAT WE HAD IN MIND WHEN WE STRESSED CLARITY OF COMMUNICATION IN THE TRAINING MATERIALS.
THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN CLEARER.


ONE HASTY RESEARCH SESSION LATER
I'VE FOUND ANSWERS FOR YOU, SIR.
THE FABRIC IS LACED WITH MOLECULAR-LATTICE "STIFFENERS," AND THERE'S A VARIABLE ALBEDO LAYER, ALONG WITH A BUNCH OF OTHER SYSTEMS WHOSE PHYSICS I CAN'T FOLLOW, MUCH LESS EXPLAIN.
NOW BEFORE YOU SAY "THAT STILL DOESN'T ANSWER MY QUESTION," I HAVE THE ANSWER TO YOUR REAL QUESTION.
HERE IS A LIST OF THE WAYS THE STAR-SAIL CAN BE USED AS A WEAPON.
"STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT, LAST THING YOU SEE TONIGHT..."

THE SAIL IS POWERFUL, BUT THESE SAIL-POWERED ATTACKS POSE NO THREAT TO SHIELDED SHIPS.
THEY POSE A THREAT TO THE HABITAT. THE HAB COULD BE LEVERAGED AS A HOSTAGE, AND TROOPS ABOARD IT WOULD OBVIOUSLY BE VULNERABLE IF THE SAIL BEGINS SLAGGING THE FACILITY.
THEN THE SAFEST PLAN IS TO SHRED THE SAIL BEFORE WE BOARD THE HABITAT.
OF THE WORDS "GOODWILL" AND "MISSION," WHICH ONE SUGGESTS OPENING FIRE ON THE WAY IN?
THAT'D BE "MISSION."


WE CAN PROTECT OURSELVES WITHOUT A FIRST STRIKE. THE BOATS CAN LAY DOWN STANDBY ORDNANCE.
PRE-TARGETED. A BIG ENOUGH SWARM OF MISSILES COULD PUT A STOP TO A SAIL-BASED ATTACK BEFORE ANYONE GETS HURT.
THE MISSILES WOULDN'T EVEN NEED TO DETONATE. JUST ZIPPING BACK AND FORTH THROUGH THE FABRIC WOULD DO THE JOB.
A SWARM OF MISSILES ISN'T GOING TO LOOK VERY FRIENDLY.
THEY'RE ON STANDBY.
THAT'S NOT THE SAME AS "FRIENDLY."

FINAL APPROACH.
DID PETEY SAY ANYTHING ABOUT WHO IS SUPPOSED TO BE ANSWERING THE DOOR HERE?
WE'RE MAILING WITH THE PROTOCOLS HE PROVIDED. BUT NOBODY IS ANSWERING. YOU MIGHT HAVE TO MAKE YOUR OWN DOOR.
EEEEEEE!
IS EVERYTHING OKAY, CORPORAL?
LIEUTENANT PIBALD HAS BEGUN LEAKING JOY

STILL NO ANSWER, COMMANDER SHODAN, YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO MAKE YOUR OWN AIRLOCK.
UNDERSTOOD
DON'T PULL OUT THE HULLCUTTERS YET
I KNOW YOU'RE EXCITED, BUT I WANT TO TRY KNOCKING ON THE DOOR FIRST
WHY KNOCK? I BROUGHT DOORBELLS.
BECAUSE OF COURSE YOU HAVE ORDNANCE CALLED "DOORBELLS."
TUNED FOR A DESCENDING MINOR THIRD, THEY DO THE SING-SONG "DING-DONG" USING BOOMS.

DING
DONG

STILL NO ANSWER. MAKE A HOLE, LIEUTENANT
"A HOLE" YOU SAY. YOU WOUND ME, COMMANDER.

WATCH THE LIEUTENANT CAREFULLY, KID. HE KNOWS HOW TO MAKE A PROPERLY SIZED DOOR.

HULLCUTTING

HOW LONG ON THAT HOLE, LIEUTENANT?

MEASURE TWICE.

CUT ONCE

THAT STATEMENT HAD NO UNITS OF TIME IN IT

THIS IS A "FRIENDLY" ENTRY. I'M ASSUMING YOU WANT ME TO ***NOT*** KILL ANYBODY STANDING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS PATCH OF HULL?

YES. BUT I'D RATHER NONE OF US DIE OF OLD AGE WHILE WE WAIT

THE DOORBELL TOLD ME I NEED TO PUNCH THROUGH THIRTY-ONE CENTIMETERS OF HULLMETAL SANDWICH..

THIS RIBBON OF POLY-DOPED BOOMEX HAS TO CUT CARBONAN, BURN PIEZOGEL, SHATTER CERAMICS, DENATURE GLASS-PHASE TITANALLOYS, AND ELECTROCUTE NANNY-FOAM. AND IT NEEDS TO DO ALL THAT ***WITHOUT*** THROWING SHRAPNEL, INCANDESCENT GAS, OR HARD RADS AT THE NICE PEOPLE LIVING INSIDE.

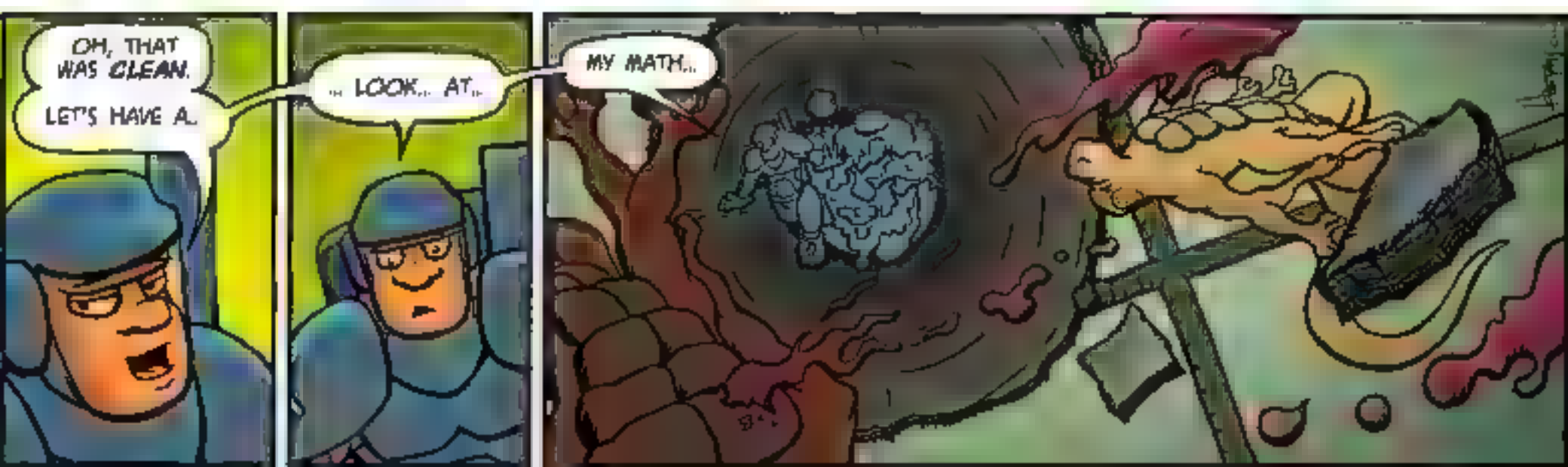
IF YOU WANT UNITS OF TIME, HAVE A LOOK AT MY MATH.

HOW.
LONG.

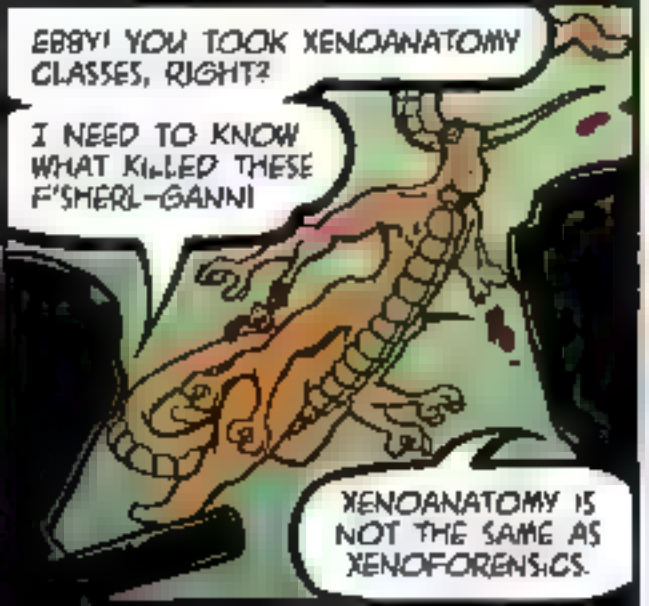
STAND
BACK.

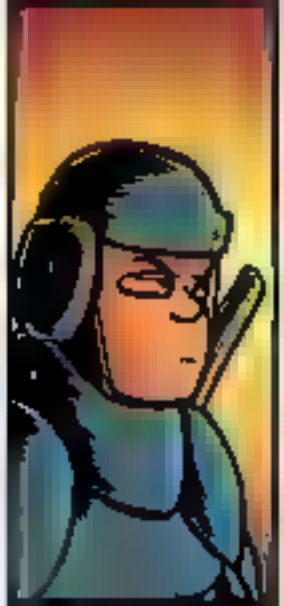
FIRE IN THE HOLE!
ON ZERO!
THREE...
TWO..
ONE...

BOOOMP


OH, THAT WAS CLEAN.
LET'S HAVE A.
... LOOK... AT...
MY MATH...

CAPTAIN, WE'VE GOT A ROOM FULL OF ROOM-TEMP CORPSES HERE
THAT MEANS YOU DIDN'T KILL THEM, RIGHT?
LIEUTENANT PIBALD SAYS HIS MATH ASSURES ME THAT THIS WAS NOT OUR FAULT


EBBY! YOU TOOK XENOANATOMY CLASSES, RIGHT?
I NEED TO KNOW WHAT KILLED THESE F'SHERL-GANNI
XENOANATOMY IS NOT THE SAME AS XENOFORENSICS.

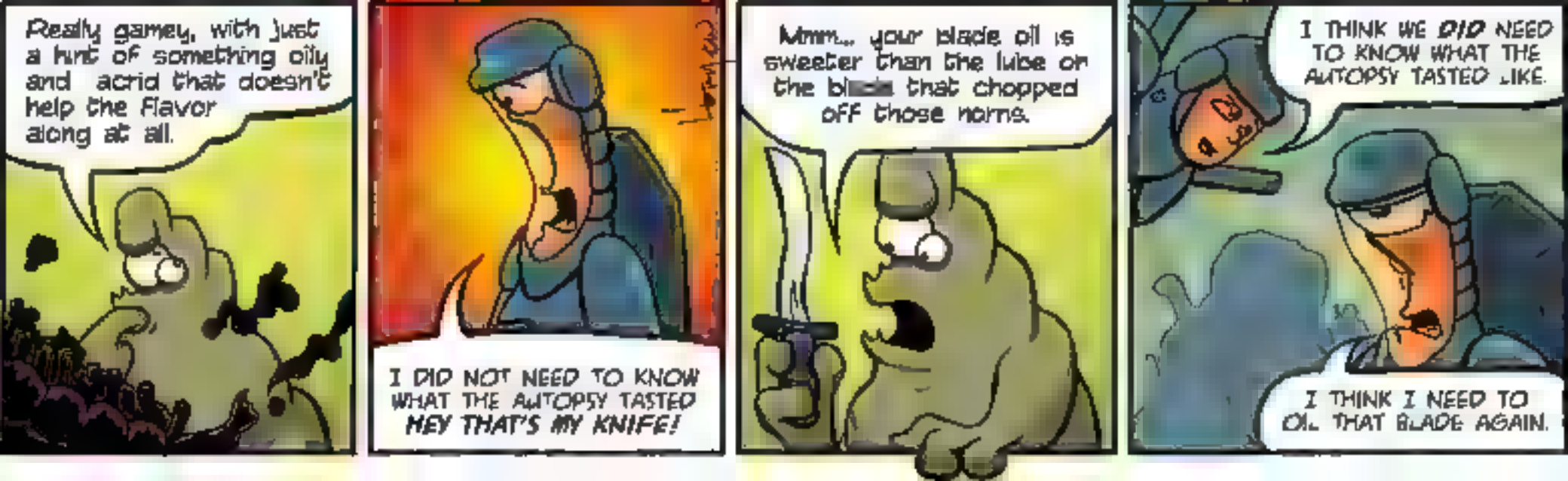


BUT I HAVE SUPPLEMENTED MY STUDY WITH LOTS OF KILLING.
I'LL TAKE A STAB AT IT

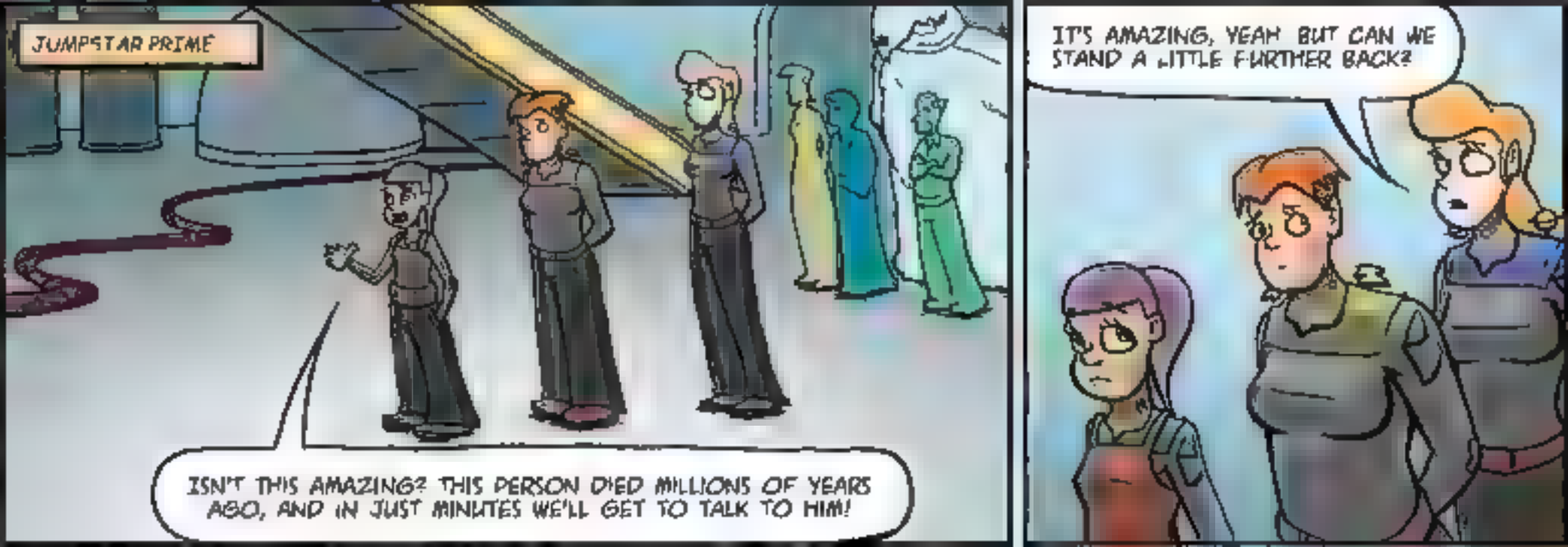
WORD CHOICE?
SCALPEL.

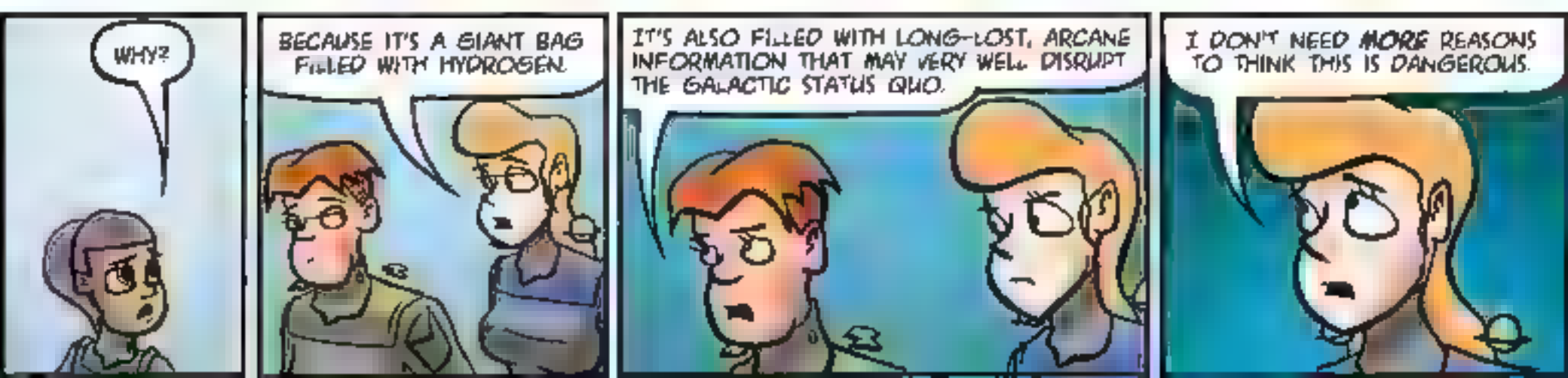
THREE HASTY AMATEUR FIELD AUTOPSIES LATER
THESE F'SHERL-GANNI WERE MASSACRED BY FOLKS WITH BLADES AND BULLETS.
ALSO, I THINK THE PERPETRATORS TOOK "TROPHIES."
ALL THE VICTIMS HAVE SEVERE HEAD TRAUMA, NONE OF THEM HAVE HORNS ANYMORE, AND I DON'T SEE ANY HORNS FLOATING AROUND THIS ROOM.
ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, WE'RE MUCH BETTER ARMED THAN WHOEVER DID THIS.
THE BRIGHT SIDE IS GOING TO GO A BIT DARK.

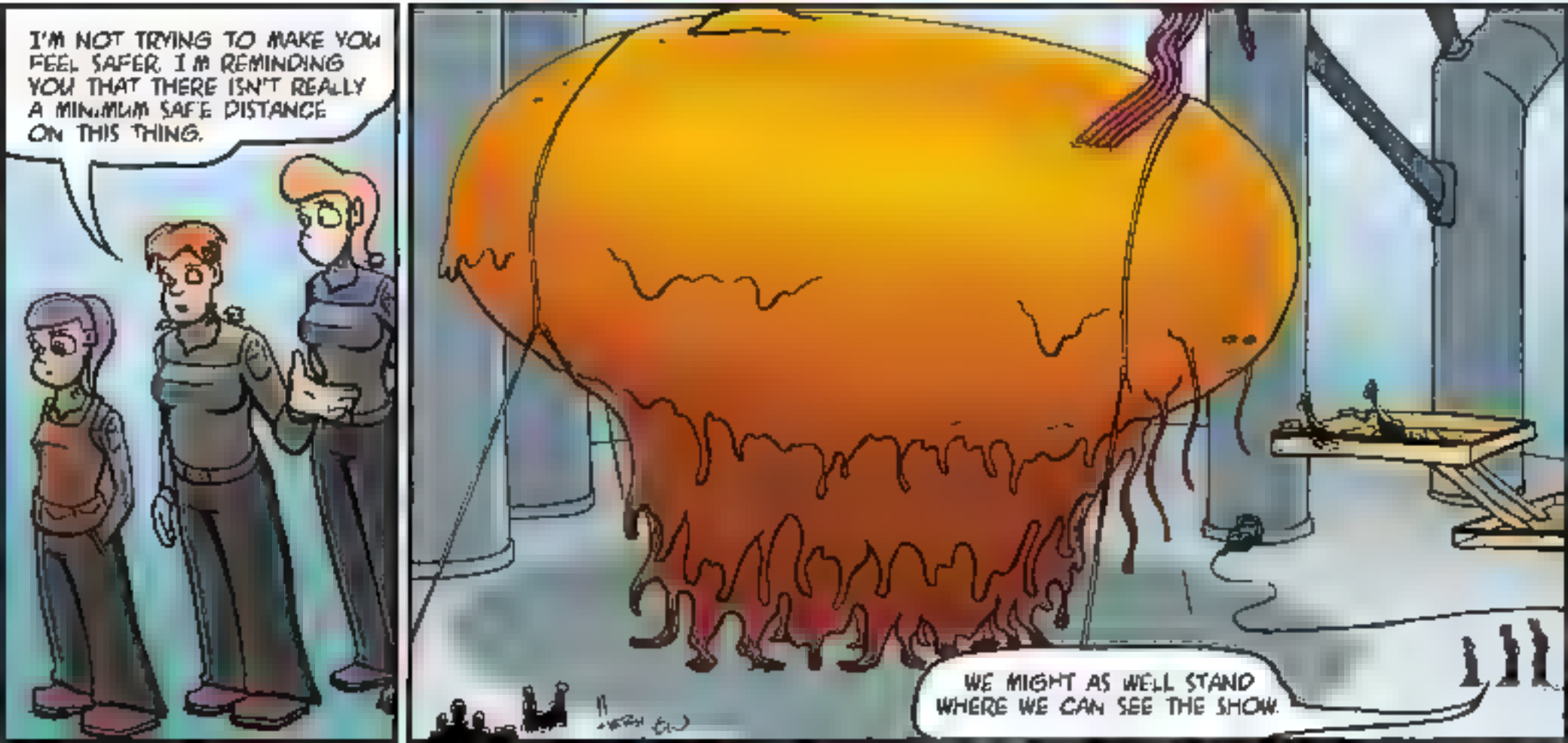
SERGEANT, WHY ARE YOU OOZING YOURSELF OUT OF YOUR ARMOR-BUBBLE?
Ebby said whoever killed these F'Sheri-Ganni used blades and bullets.
Those don't scare me.
Besides, I've never tasted F'Sheri-Ganni
HEY HEY HEY!
STOP EATING MY AUTOPSY!
Sorry, it looked like you were done with it.


Really gamey, with just a hint of something oily and acrid that doesn't help the flavor along at all.
I DID NOT NEED TO KNOW WHAT THE AUTOPSY TASTED
HEY THAT'S MY KNIFE!
Mmm... your blade oil is sweeter than the lube on the blade that chopped off those horns.
I THINK WE DID NEED TO KNOW WHAT THE AUTOPSY TASTED LIKE.
I THINK I NEED TO OIL THAT BLADE AGAIN.

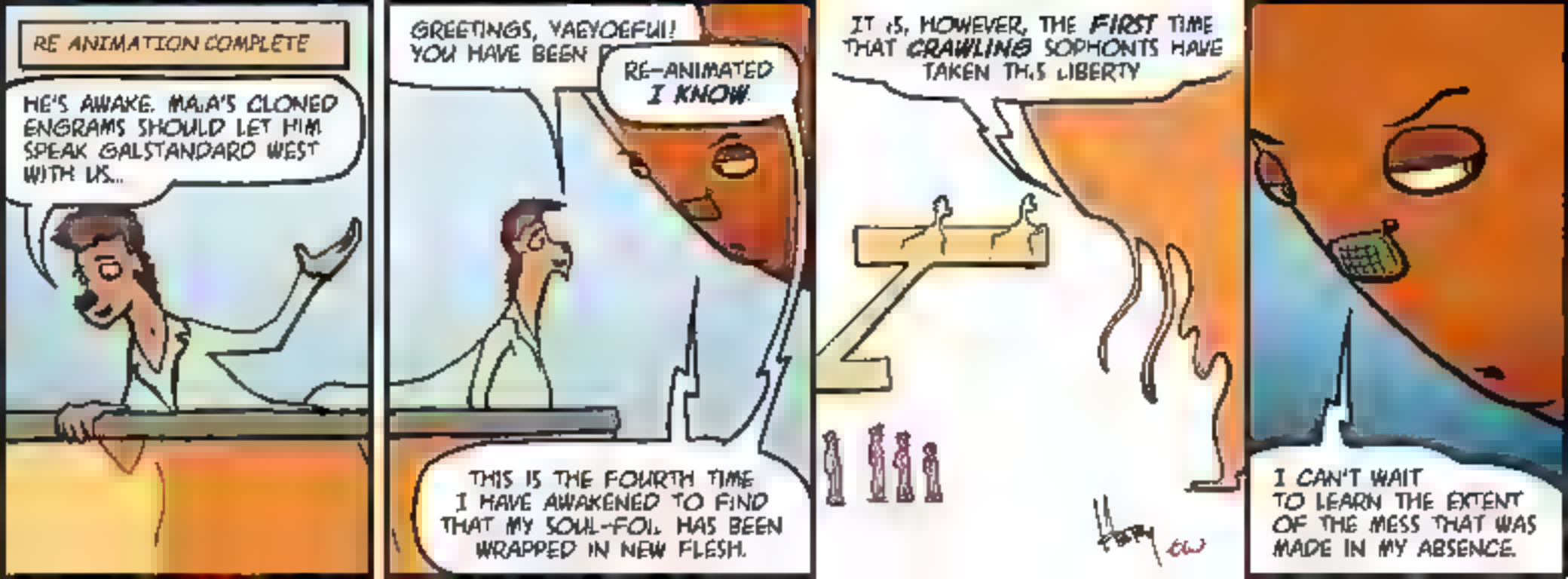
CAN YOU TRACK THE SCENT OF THAT OIL YOU TASTED?
You betcha.
THEN WE'RE FOLLOWING YOU, SERGEANT. THANKS FOR TAKING THE INITIATIVE ON THIS.
It wasn't initiative. I just wanted to know what one of these goat-lizards tasted like.
I'M STILL GIVING YOU CREDIT, SERGEANT. CHAPTER IV OF THE THOOPO HAS LOTS OF TIPS FOR WEAPONIZING YOUR APPETITE.

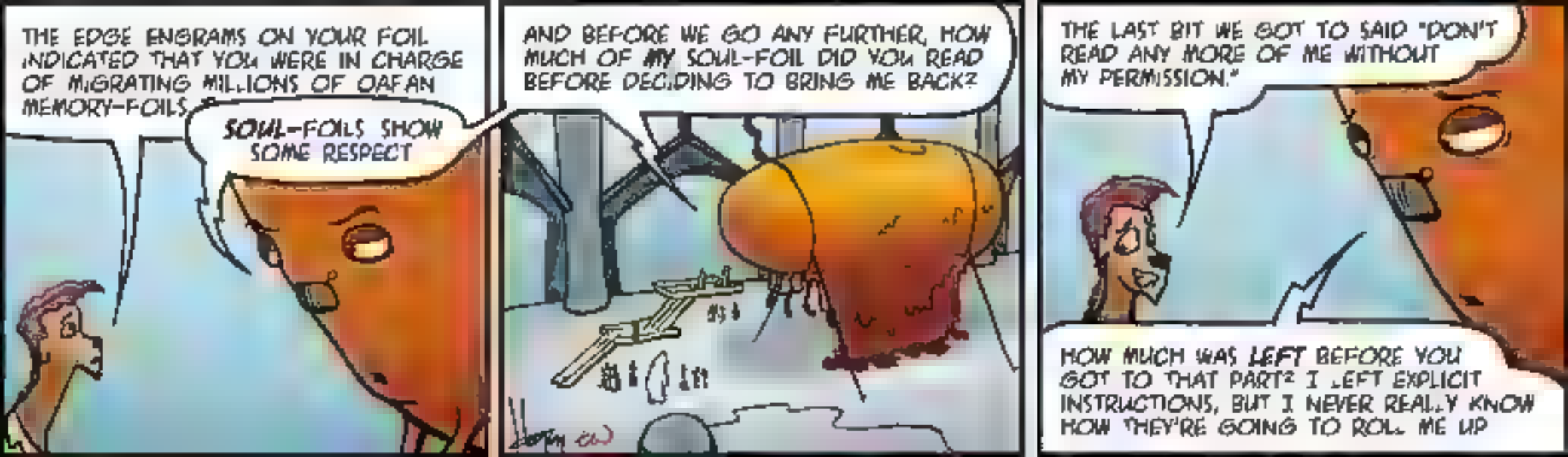

JUMPSTAR PRIME
ISN'T THIS AMAZING? THIS PERSON DIED MILLIONS OF YEARS AGO, AND IN JUST MINUTES WE'LL GET TO TALK TO HIM!
IT'S AMAZING, YEAH BUT CAN WE STAND A LITTLE FURTHER BACK?

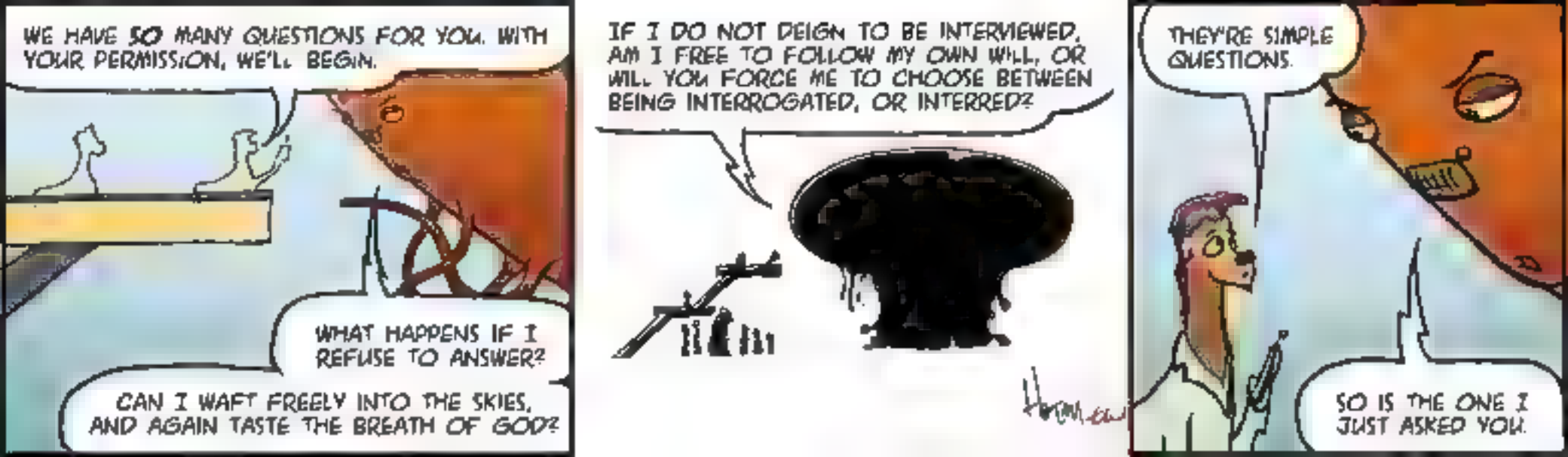

WHY?
BECAUSE IT'S A GIANT BAG FILLED WITH HYDROGEN.
IT'S ALSO FILLED WITH LONG-LOST, ARCANE INFORMATION THAT MAY VERY WELL DISRUPT THE GALACTIC STATUS QUO.
I DON'T NEED MORE REASONS TO THINK THIS IS DANGEROUS.


I'M NOT TRYING TO MAKE YOU FEEL SAFER. I'M REMINDING YOU THAT THERE ISN'T REALLY A MINIMUM SAFE DISTANCE ON THIS THING.
WE MIGHT AS WELL STAND WHERE WE CAN SEE THE SHOW.

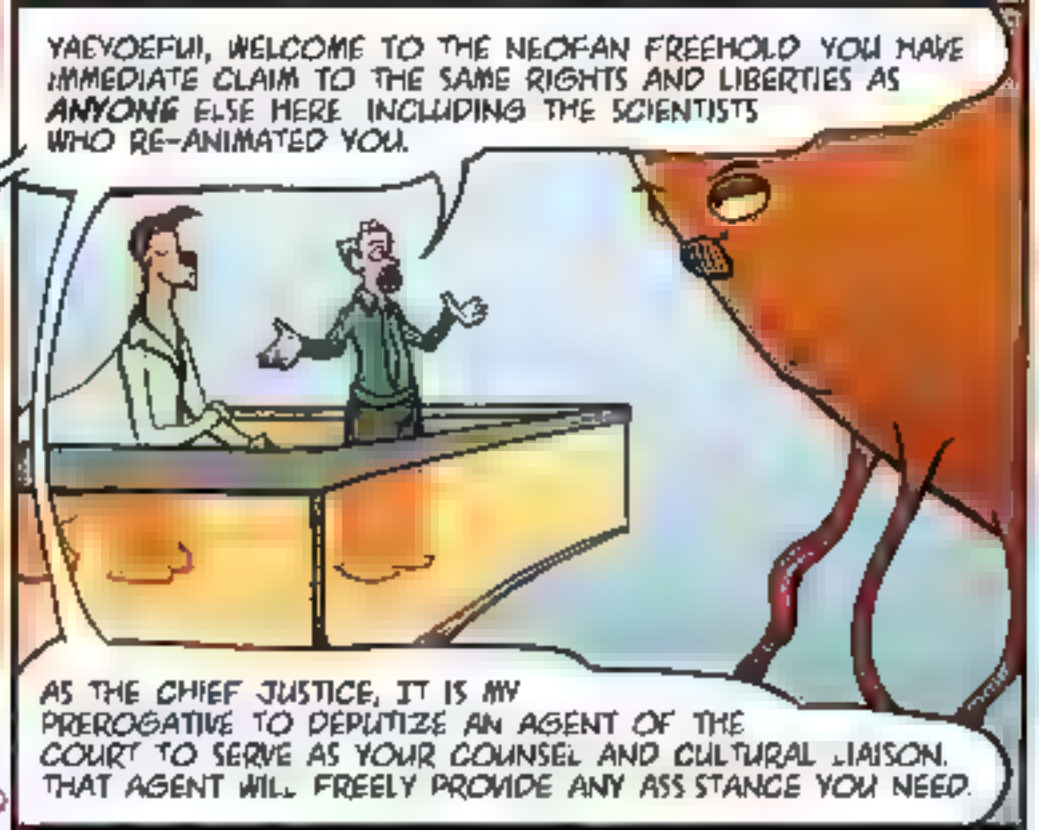
"SAFE" IS OVERRATED. THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO WANT YOU TO THINK THAT YOU'RE SAFE ARE YOUR ENEMIES.
HEY NOW... WE WANT OUR CLIENTS TO FEEL SAFE.
HOW IS THAT ANY DIFFERENT? THROUGH FORCE OF ARMS AND POWER OF POSITION WE TAKE THEIR MONEY.
YOU'RE NOT WRINKLY ENOUGH TO BE THAT CYNICAL.
NEW FACE.
SMILE MORE, SISTER. YOU GOTTA BREAK THAT THING IN.


RE ANIMATION COMPLETE
HE'S AWAKE. MAJA'S CLONED ENGRAMS SHOULD LET HIM SPEAK GALSTANDARD WEST WITH US...
GREETINGS, YAEYOEFUI! YOU HAVE BEEN
RE-ANIMATED I KNOW.
THIS IS THE FOURTH TIME I HAVE AWAKENED TO FIND THAT MY SOUL-FOIL HAS BEEN WRAPPED IN NEW FLESH.
IT IS, HOWEVER, THE FIRST TIME THAT CRAWLING SOPHONTS HAVE TAKEN THIS LIBERTY
I CAN'T WAIT TO LEARN THE EXTENT OF THE MESS THAT WAS MADE IN MY ABSENCE.

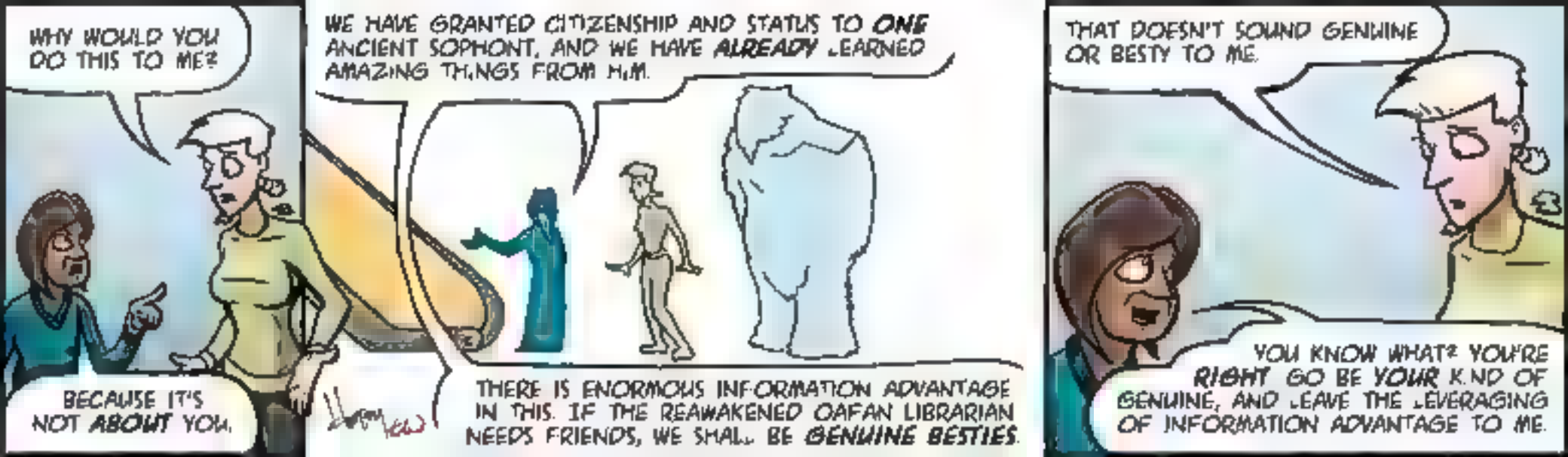

THE EDGE ENGRAMS ON YOUR FOIL INDICATED THAT YOU WERE IN CHARGE OF MIGRATING MILLIONS OF OAFAN MEMORY-FOILS.
SOUL-FOILS SHOW SOME RESPECT
AND BEFORE WE GO ANY FURTHER, HOW MUCH OF MY SOUL-FOIL DID YOU READ BEFORE DECIDING TO BRING ME BACK?
THE LAST BIT WE GOT TO SAID "DON'T READ ANY MORE OF ME WITHOUT MY PERMISSION."
HOW MUCH WAS LEFT BEFORE YOU GOT TO THAT PART? I LEFT EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONS, BUT I NEVER REALLY KNOW HOW THEY'RE GOING TO ROLL ME UP


WE HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS FOR YOU. WITH YOUR PERMISSION, WE'LL BEGIN.
WHAT HAPPENS IF I REFUSE TO ANSWER?
CAN I WAFT FREELY INTO THE SKIES, AND AGAIN TASTE THE BREATH OF GOD?
IF I DO NOT DEIGN TO BE INTERVIEWED, AM I FREE TO FOLLOW MY OWN WILL, OR WILL YOU FORCE ME TO CHOOSE BETWEEN BEING INTERROGATED, OR INTERRED?
THEY'RE SIMPLE QUESTIONS.
SO IS THE ONE I JUST ASKED YOU.

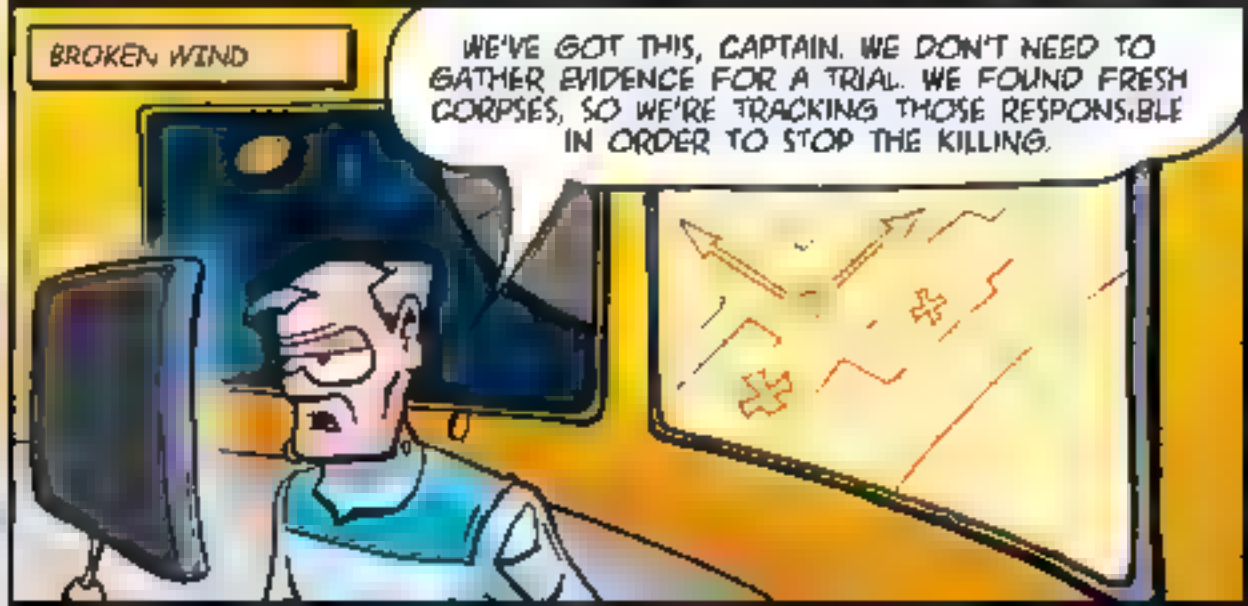
SCIENTISTS...
HONESTLY I EXPECTED YOU TO SCREW THIS UP
JUST NOT SO QUICKLY


YAEVOEFUI, WELCOME TO THE NEOFAN FREEHOLD YOU HAVE IMMEDIATE CLAIM TO THE SAME RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES AS ANYONE ELSE HERE INCLUDING THE SCIENTISTS WHO RE-ANIMATED YOU.
AS THE CHIEF JUSTICE, IT IS MY PREROGATIVE TO DEPUTIZE AN AGENT OF THE COURT TO SERVE AS YOUR COUNSEL AND CULTURAL LIAISON. THAT AGENT WILL FREELY PROVIDE ANY ASSISTANCE YOU NEED.

DEPUTIZE? OH NO. DOES JUSTICE REYNSTEIN KNOW I'VE DONE CULTURAL LIAISON WORK?
DOES HE KNOW? CAPTAIN, I MADE SURE YOUR NAME WAS THE ONLY ONE IN HIS HAT

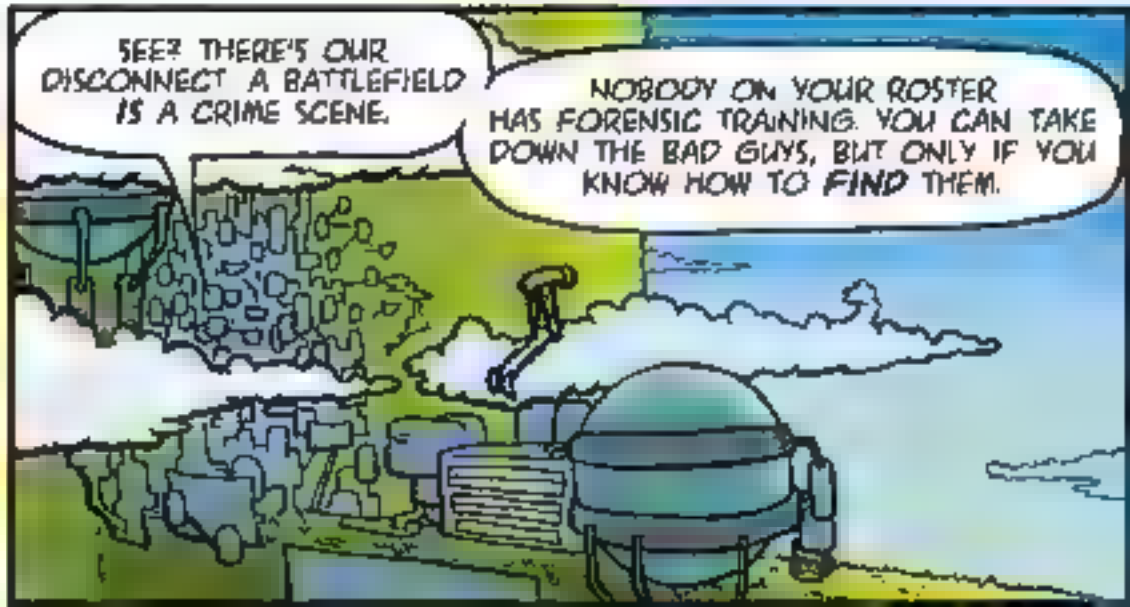

WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?
BECAUSE IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU.
WE HAVE GRANTED CITIZENSHIP AND STATUS TO ONE ANCIENT SOPHONT, AND WE HAVE ALREADY LEARNED AMAZING THINGS FROM HIM.
THERE IS ENORMOUS INFORMATION ADVANTAGE IN THIS. IF THE REAWAKENED OAFAN LIBRARIAN NEEDS FRIENDS, WE SHALL BE GENUINE BESTIES.
THAT DOESN'T SOUND GENUINE OR BESTY TO ME.
YOU KNOW WHAT? YOU'RE RIGHT. GO BE YOUR KIND OF GENUINE, AND LEAVE THE LEVERAGING OF INFORMATION ADVANTAGE TO ME.

JUMPSTAR PRIME
COMMODORE, THIS LATEST DISPATCH. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO RUN A MURDER INVESTIGATION.


BROKEN WIND
WE'VE GOT THIS, CAPTAIN. WE DON'T NEED TO GATHER EVIDENCE FOR A TRIAL. WE FOUND FRESH CORPSES, SO WE'RE TRACKING THOSE RESPONSIBLE IN ORDER TO STOP THE KILLING.

AH. SO IT'S NOT *LIKE* A MURDER INVESTIGATION.
IT'S *EXACTLY THE SAME AS* A MURDER INVESTIGATION.

THIS IS A BATTLEFIELD, NOT A CRIME SCENE.

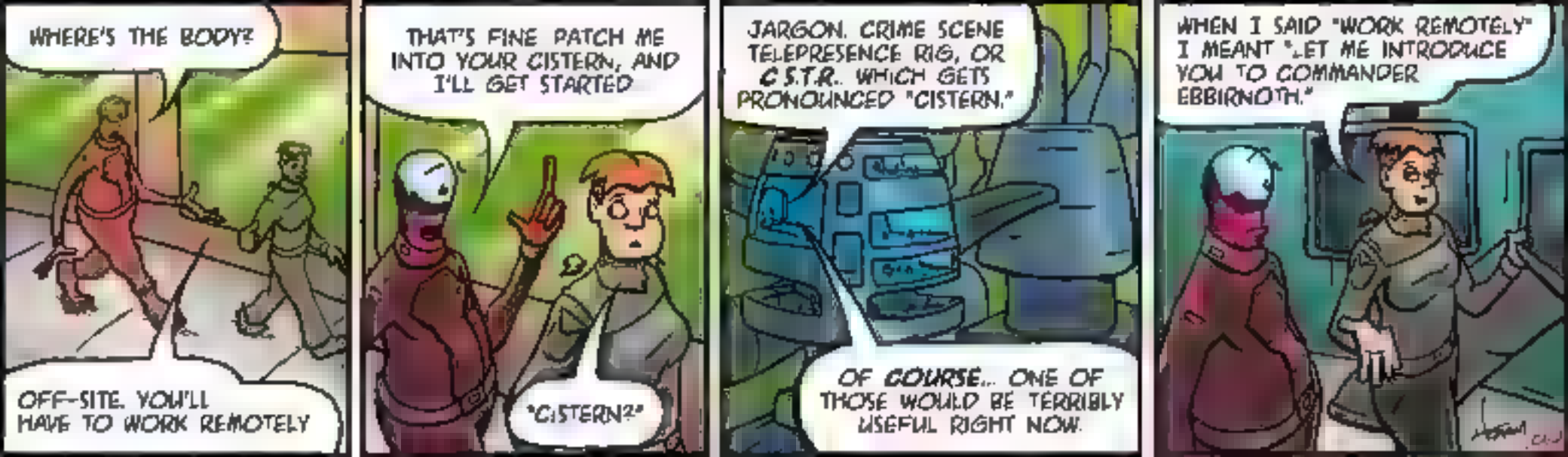

SEE? THERE'S OUR DISCONNECT. A BATTLEFIELD *IS* A CRIME SCENE.
NOBODY ON YOUR ROSTER HAS FORENSIC TRAINING. YOU CAN TAKE DOWN THE BAD GUYS, BUT ONLY IF YOU KNOW HOW TO *FIND* THEM.

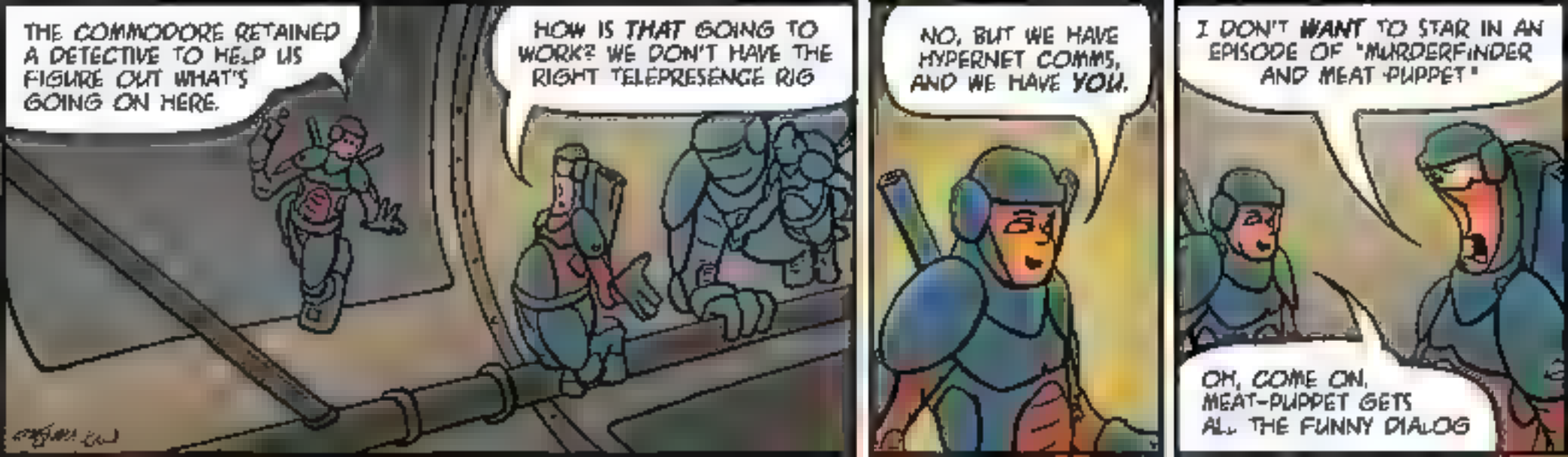
EBBY DID PRETTY WELL WITH THE AUTOPSIES, AND SCHLOCK IS FOLLOWING A CHEMICAL TRAIL
WE'LL MUSCLE THROUGH THIS.
"MUSCLE THROUGH THIS..."
SANCTUM INEPTUM
I'LL CALL YOU BACK, COMMODORE I NEED TO FIND YOU THE RIGHT SET OF MUSCLES.
'KAY
I NEED TO FIND MY "OLD-EARTH-EPITHETS" PHRASE BOOK, AND MAYBE FLIP THROUGH IT

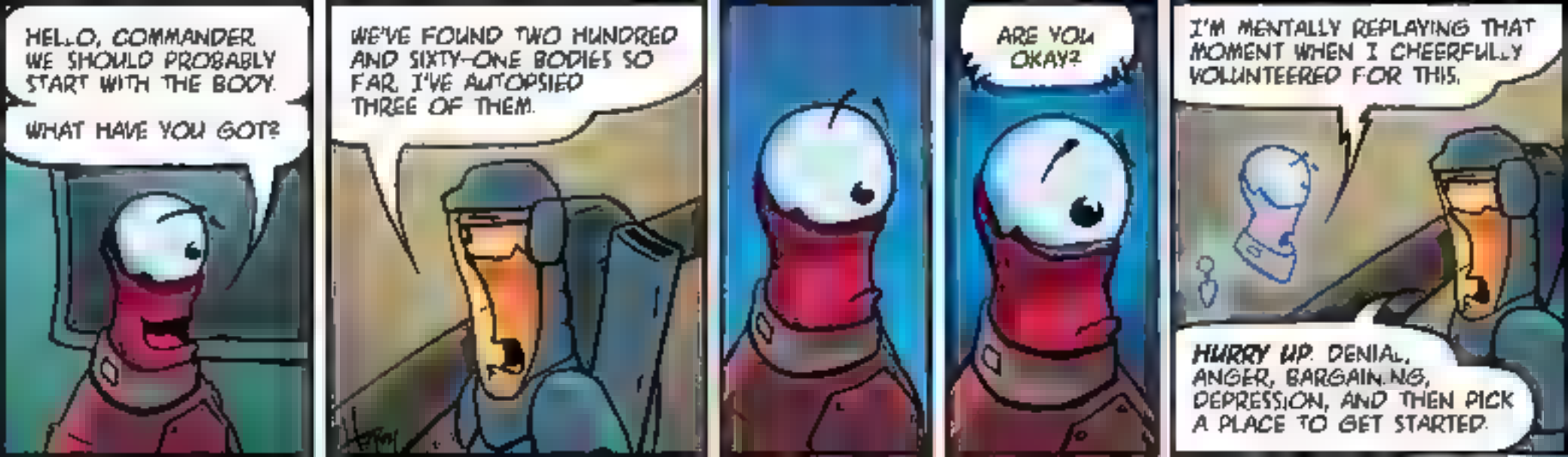
COLONEL, DO YOU HAVE A HOMICIDE DETECTIVE I CAN BORROW?
SORRY SANCTUM ADROIT INTERNAL AFFAIRS HAS TASK-FORCED ALL OF THEM FOR INVESTIGATION OF THE CELGATE INCIDENT

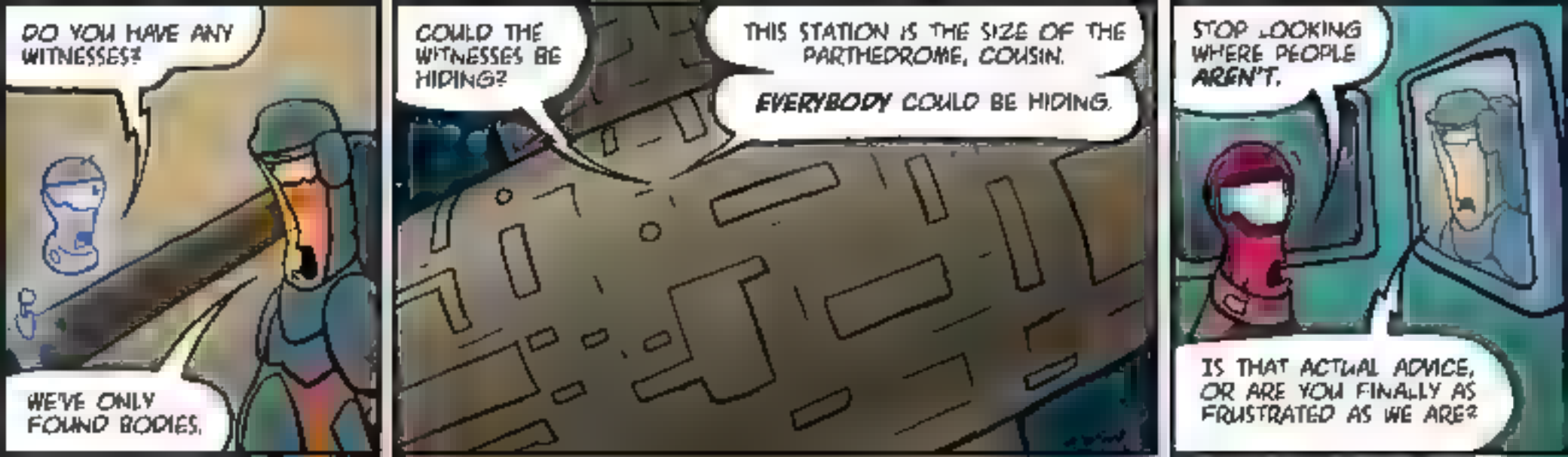
I WORKED HOMICIDE FOR ELEVEN YEARS, COLONEL
LIEUTENANT IF I CUT YOU LOOSE WHO WILL SCREEN MY CALLS?

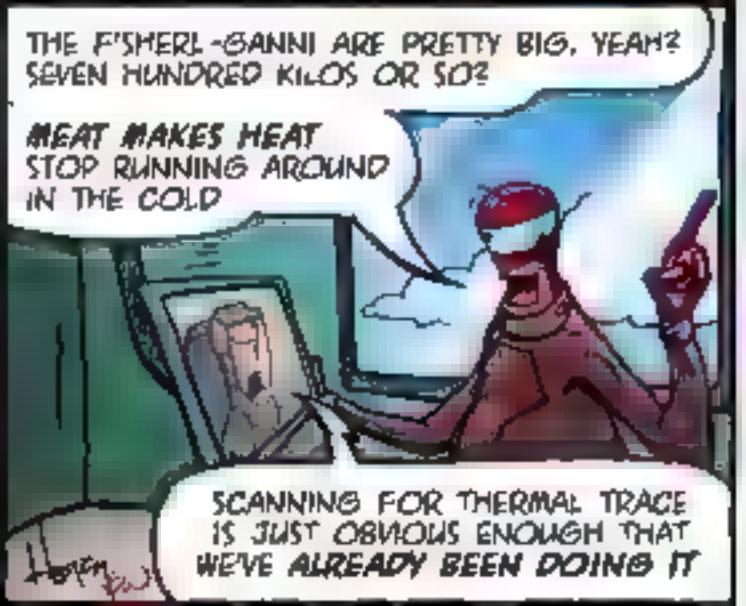
MY OLD JOB JUST CALLED TO COMPLAIN ABOUT BEING THROWN UNDER THE SKYBUS.
YOU TAKE THAT CALL, I'M TAKING THE LIEUTENANT


WHERE'S THE BODY?
OFF-SITE. YOU'LL HAVE TO WORK REMOTELY
THAT'S FINE. PATCH ME INTO YOUR CISTERN, AND I'LL GET STARTED
"CISTERN?"
JARGON. CRIME SCENE TELEPRESENCE RIG, OR C.S.T.R.. WHICH GETS PRONOUNCED "CISTERN."
OF COURSE... ONE OF THOSE WOULD BE TERRIBLY USEFUL RIGHT NOW.
WHEN I SAID "WORK REMOTELY" I MEANT "LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO COMMANDER EBBIRNOTH."

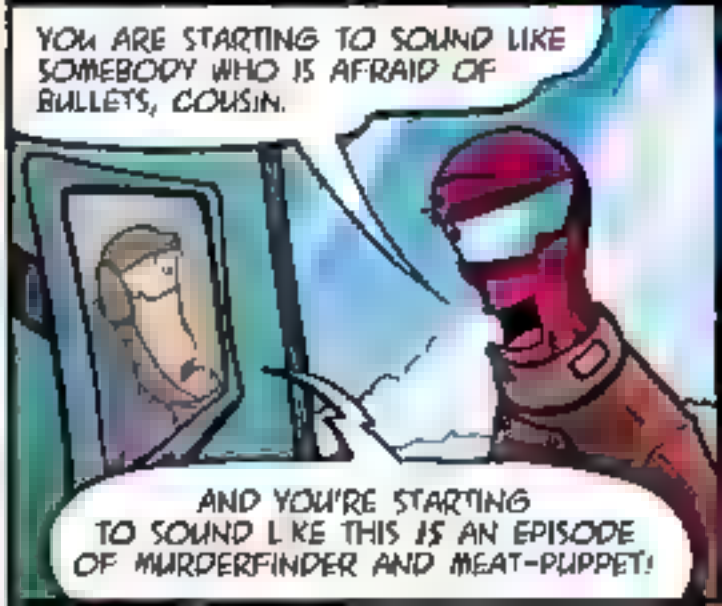

THE COMMODORE RETAINED A DETECTIVE TO HELP US FIGURE OUT WHAT'S GOING ON HERE.
HOW IS THAT GOING TO WORK? WE DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT TELEPRESENCE RIG
NO, BUT WE HAVE HYPERNET COMMS, AND WE HAVE YOU.
I DON'T WANT TO STAR IN AN EPISODE OF "MURDERFINDER AND MEAT PUPPET"
OH, COME ON, MEAT-PUPPET GETS ALL THE FUNNY DIALOG

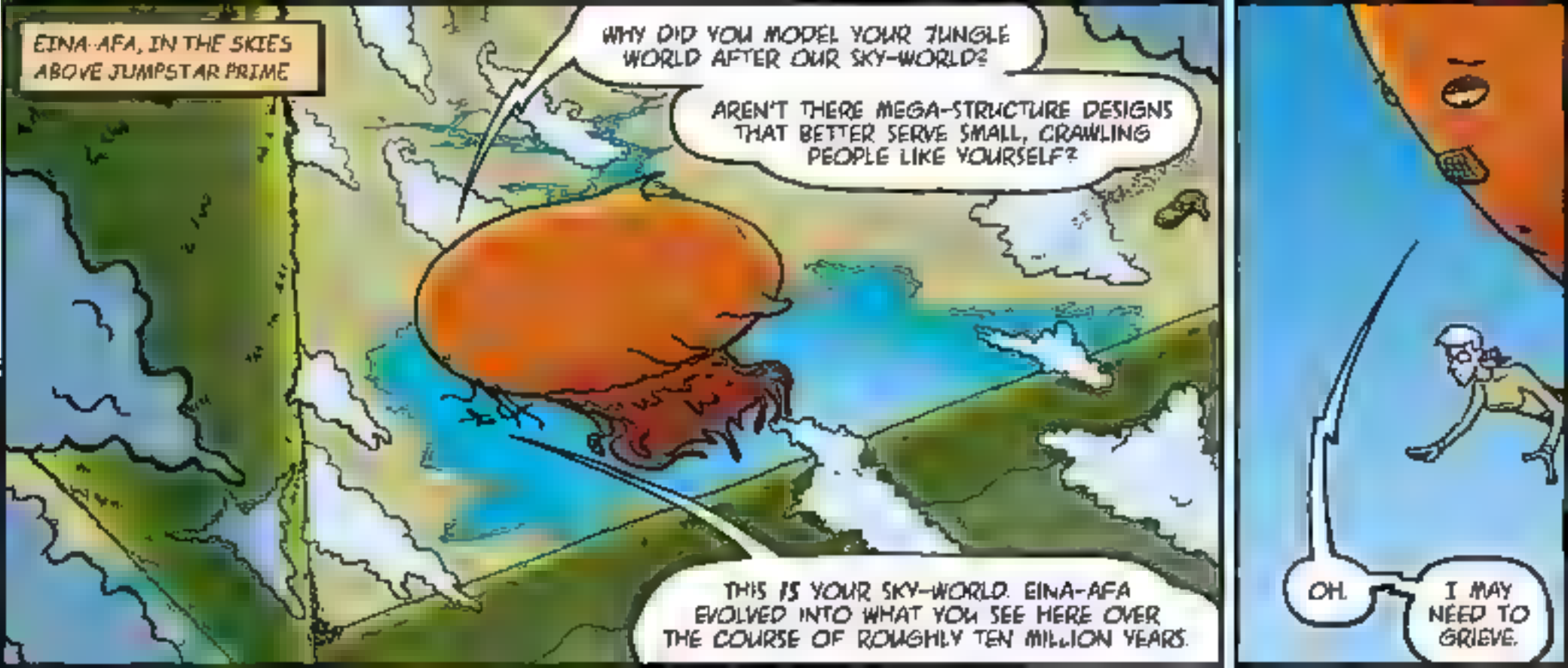

HELLO, COMMANDER. WE SHOULD PROBABLY START WITH THE BODY.
WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?
WE'VE FOUND TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY-ONE BODIES SO FAR. I'VE AUTOPSIED THREE OF THEM.
ARE YOU OKAY?
I'M MENTALLY REPLAYING THAT MOMENT WHEN I CHEERFULLY VOLUNTEERED FOR THIS.
HURRY UP. DENIAL, ANGER, BARGAINING, DEPRESSION, AND THEN PICK A PLACE TO GET STARTED.

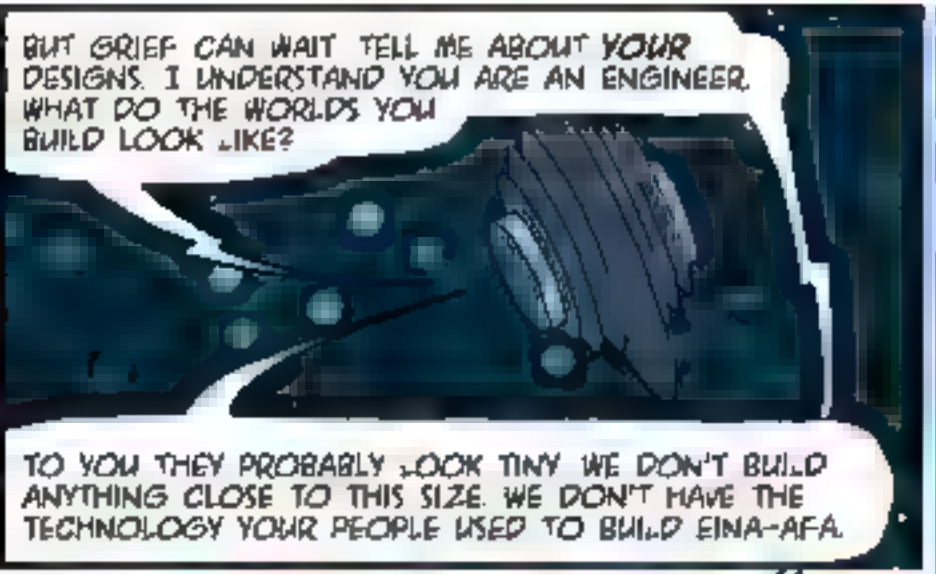

DO YOU HAVE ANY WITNESSES?
WE'VE ONLY FOUND BODIES.
COULD THE WITNESSES BE HIDING?
THIS STATION IS THE SIZE OF THE PARTHEDROME, COUSIN.
EVERYBODY COULD BE HIDING.
STOP LOOKING WHERE PEOPLE AREN'T.
IS THAT ACTUAL ADVICE, OR ARE YOU FINALLY AS FRUSTRATED AS WE ARE?


THE F'SHERL-GANNI ARE PRETTY BIG, YEAH? SEVEN HUNDRED KILOS OR SO?
MEAT MAKES HEAT STOP RUNNING AROUND IN THE COLD
SCANNING FOR THERMAL TRACE IS JUST OBVIOUS ENOUGH THAT WE'VE ALREADY BEEN DOING IT

HAVE YOU BEEN RUNNING?
WE'VE BEEN SCANNING AS WE SLOWLY ADVANCE THAT'S S.O.P. WHEN THERE MIGHT BE HOSTILES.

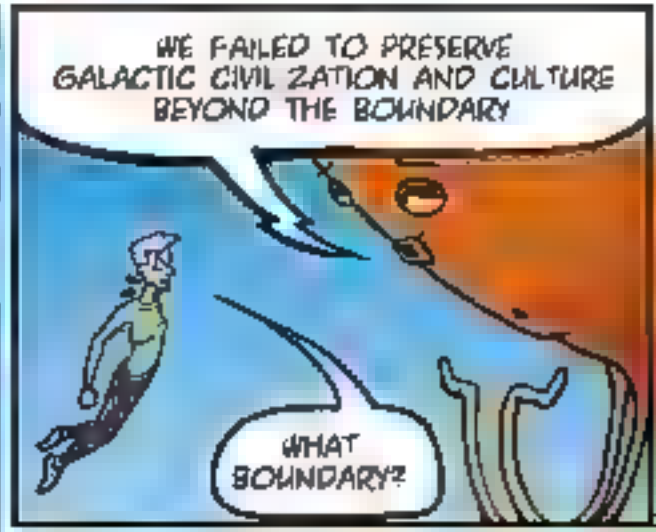

YOU ARE STARTING TO SOUND LIKE SOMEBODY WHO IS AFRAID OF BULLETS, COUSIN.
AND YOU'RE STARTING TO SOUND LIKE THIS IS AN EPISODE OF MURDERFINDER AND MEAT-PUPPET!


EINA-AFA, IN THE SKIES ABOVE JUMPSTAR PRIME
WHY DID YOU MODEL YOUR JUNGLE WORLD AFTER OUR SKY-WORLD?
AREN'T THERE MEGA-STRUCTURE DESIGNS THAT BETTER SERVE SMALL, CRAWLING PEOPLE LIKE YOURSELF?
THIS IS YOUR SKY-WORLD. EINA-AFA EVOLVED INTO WHAT YOU SEE HERE OVER THE COURSE OF ROUGHLY TEN MILLION YEARS.
OH.
I MAY NEED TO GRIEVE.

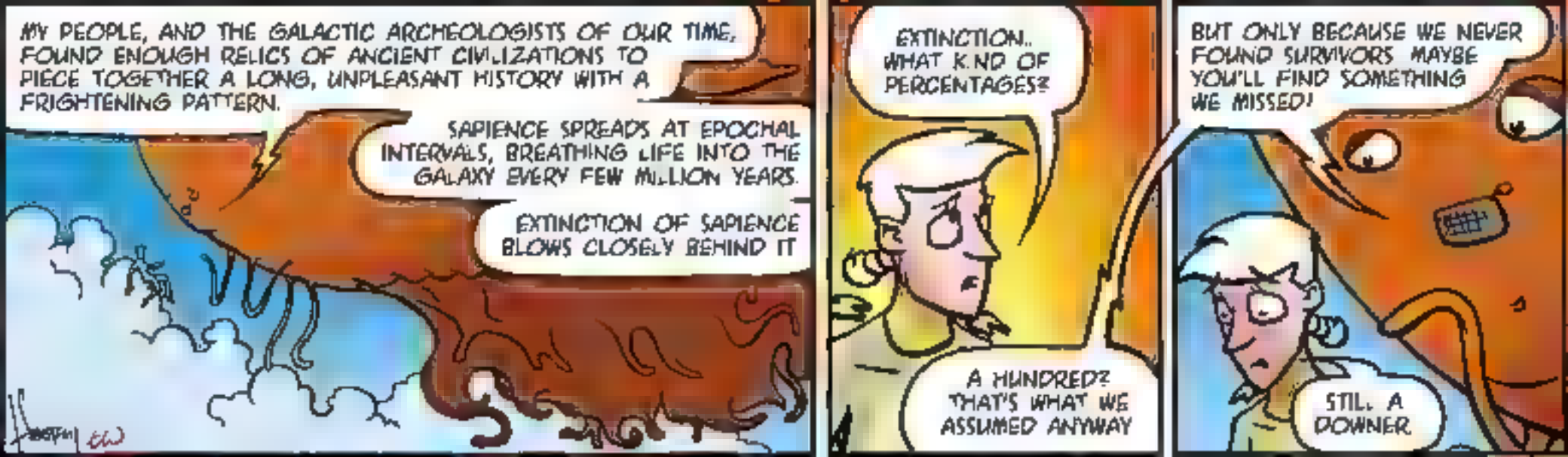

BUT GRIEF CAN WAIT. TELL ME ABOUT YOUR DESIGNS. I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE AN ENGINEER. WHAT DO THE WORLDS YOU BUILD LOOK LIKE?
TO YOU THEY PROBABLY LOOK TINY. WE DON'T BUILD ANYTHING CLOSE TO THIS SIZE. WE DON'T HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY YOUR PEOPLE USED TO BUILD EINA-AFA.

THEN MY PEOPLE FAILED COMPLETELY.
I SHALL CERTAINLY NEED TO GRIEVE

I'M MISSING SOMETHING.
WHAT FAILURE ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?


WE FAILED TO PRESERVE GALACTIC CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE BEYOND THE BOUNDARY
WHAT BOUNDARY?

YOU ARE DEFINITELY MISSING SOMETHING.

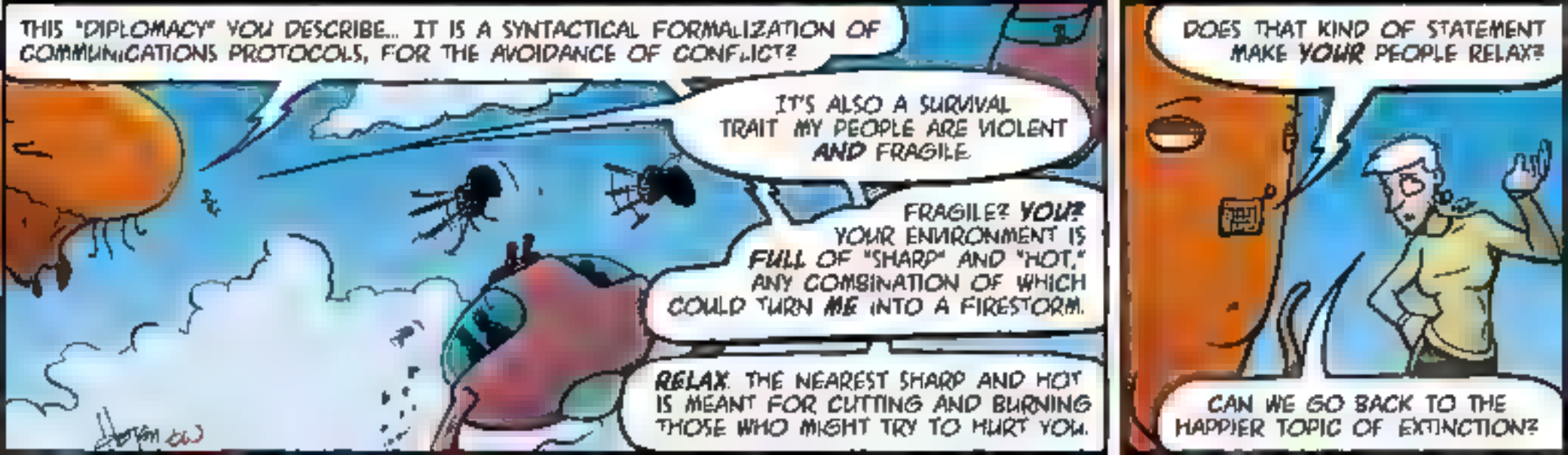

MY PEOPLE, AND THE GALACTIC ARCHEOLOGISTS OF OUR TIME, FOUND ENOUGH RELICS OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS TO PIECE TOGETHER A LONG, UNPLEASANT HISTORY WITH A FRIGHTENING PATTERN.
SAPIENCE SPREADS AT EPOCHAL INTERVALS, BREATHING LIFE INTO THE GALAXY EVERY FEW MILLION YEARS.
EXTINCTION OF SAPIENCE BLOWS CLOSELY BEHIND IT
EXTINCTION.. WHAT KIND OF PERCENTAGES?
A HUNDRED? THAT'S WHAT WE ASSUMED ANYWAY
BUT ONLY BECAUSE WE NEVER FOUND SURVIVORS. MAYBE YOU'LL FIND SOMETHING WE MISSED!
STILL A DOWNER.

MODERN GALACTIC CIVILIZATION HAS UNCOVERED A FEW PLANETARY RUINS, LIKE GHANJ-RHO, AND ELLWOR, BUT OUR ARCHEOLOGISTS DON'T HAVE ENOUGH EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE STORY YOU'RE TELLING.
YOU FOUND THIS PLACE. YOU FOUND ME.

YOUR EXISTENCE ISN'T ACTUALLY PROOF POSITIVE OF THE STORY YOU TELL.

AH. SKEPTICISM.
THE RISING GENERATION REALLY IS SAPIENT
FLATTERY ALSO IS NOT PROOF

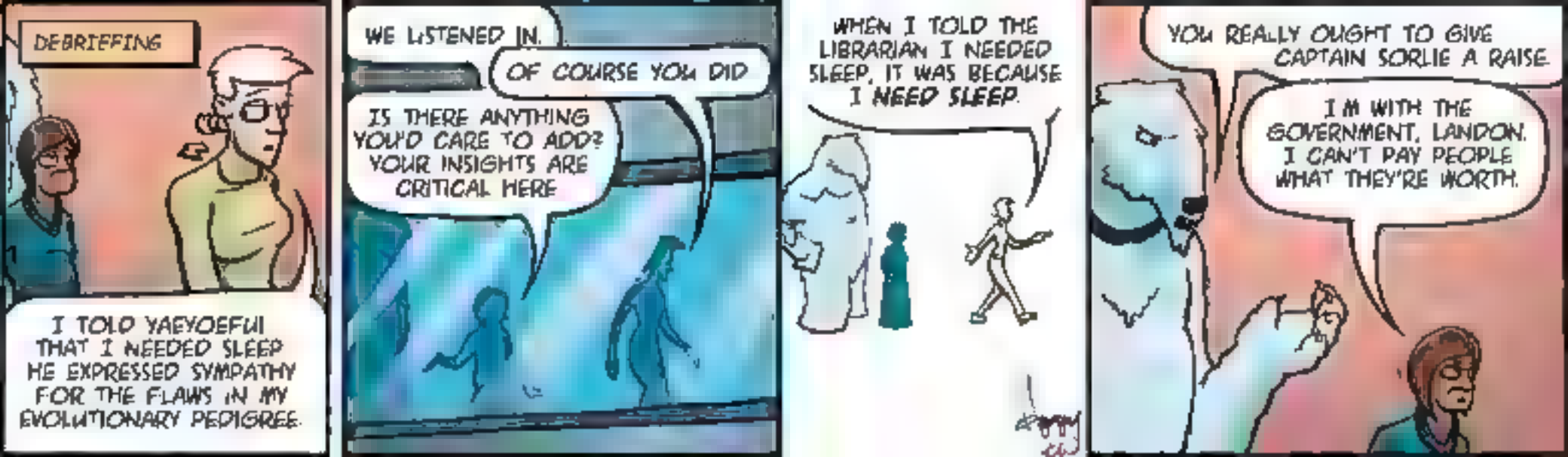
YOU DO REALIZE THAT MY COMMENT ABOUT YOUR SAPIENCE WAS NOT ACTUALLY FLATTERY.
OF COURSE I WAS DEFLECTING THAT BARB IN ORDER TO STAY ON TOPIC.
YOU CREATED A FICTION IN WHICH I COULD PRETEND THAT MY INSULT BLEW PAST YOU UNNOTICED, SO THAT IN THAT PRETENSE I COULD FURTHER INFLATE MYSELF
SOUNDS ABOUT RIGHT
IT'S CALLED DIPLOMACY.
I THOUGHT I WAS GETTING THE HANG OF IT, BUT YOU CALLED ME OUT ON IT, SO I GUESS I M STILL LEARNING.
IF YOU ARE STILL LEARNING THEN YOU ARE UNQUESTIONABLY SAPIENT
AND THAT IS NOT FLATTERY IT IS RESPECT

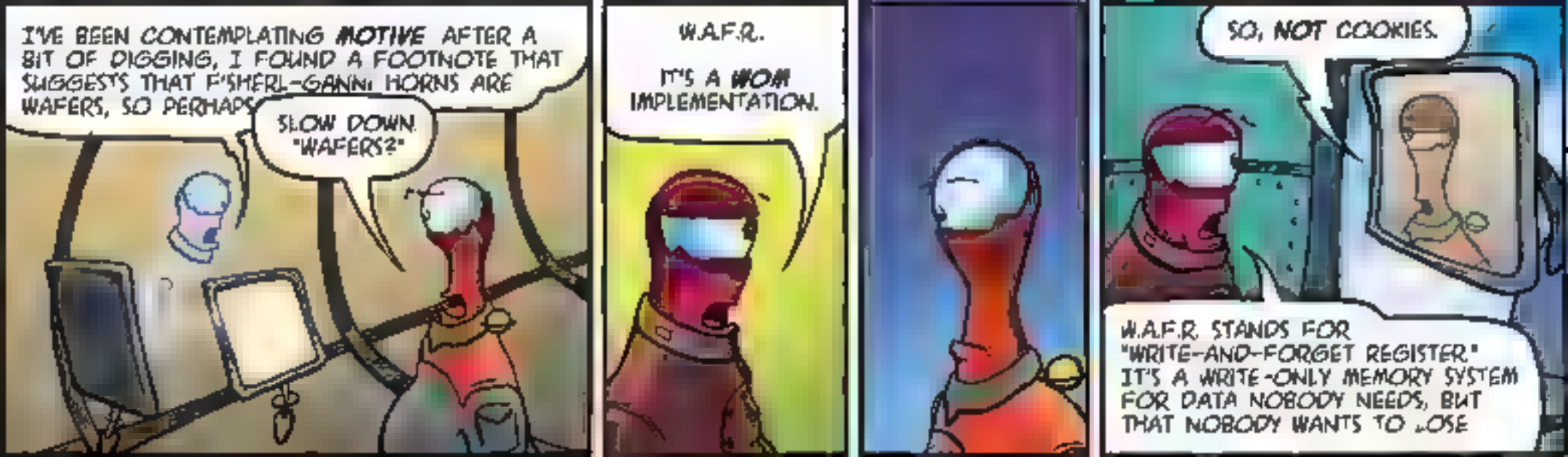

THIS "DIPLOMACY" YOU DESCRIBE... IT IS A SYNTACTICAL FORMALIZATION OF COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOLS, FOR THE AVOIDANCE OF CONFLICT?
IT'S ALSO A SURVIVAL TRAIT. MY PEOPLE ARE VIOLENT AND FRAGILE.
FRAGILE? YOU? YOUR ENVIRONMENT IS FULL OF "SHARP" AND "HOT," ANY COMBINATION OF WHICH COULD TURN ME INTO A FIRESTORM.
RELAX. THE NEAREST SHARP AND HOT IS MEANT FOR CUTTING AND BURNING THOSE WHO MIGHT TRY TO HURT YOU.
DOES THAT KIND OF STATEMENT MAKE YOUR PEOPLE RELAX?
CAN WE GO BACK TO THE HAPPIER TOPIC OF EXTINCTION?

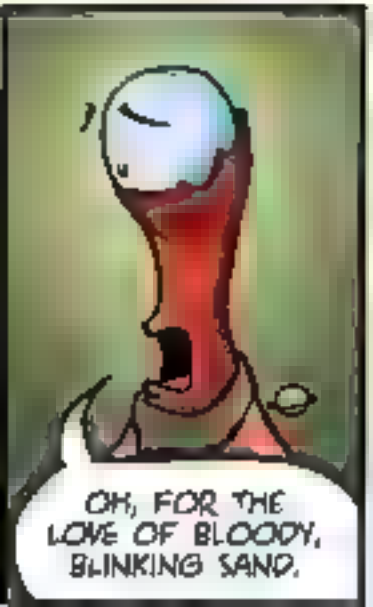
EINA-AFA WAS BUILT TO CARRY MY PEOPLE AND OUR KNOWLEDGE ACROSS THE EXTINCTION BOUNDARY.
IT FAILED
I DO NOT KNOW WHY IT FAILED.
THE SOUL-FOILS MAY HAVE THE ANSWER, BUT THERE ARE QUITE A LOT OF THEM.

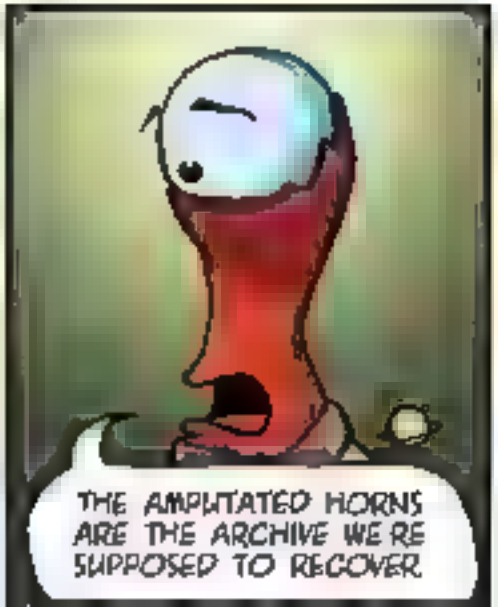
IF YOU CAN HELP US FIND THOSE ANSWERS IN THE FOILS, THEN YOU DID NOT FAIL THE KNOWLEDGE WAS CARRIED ACROSS.

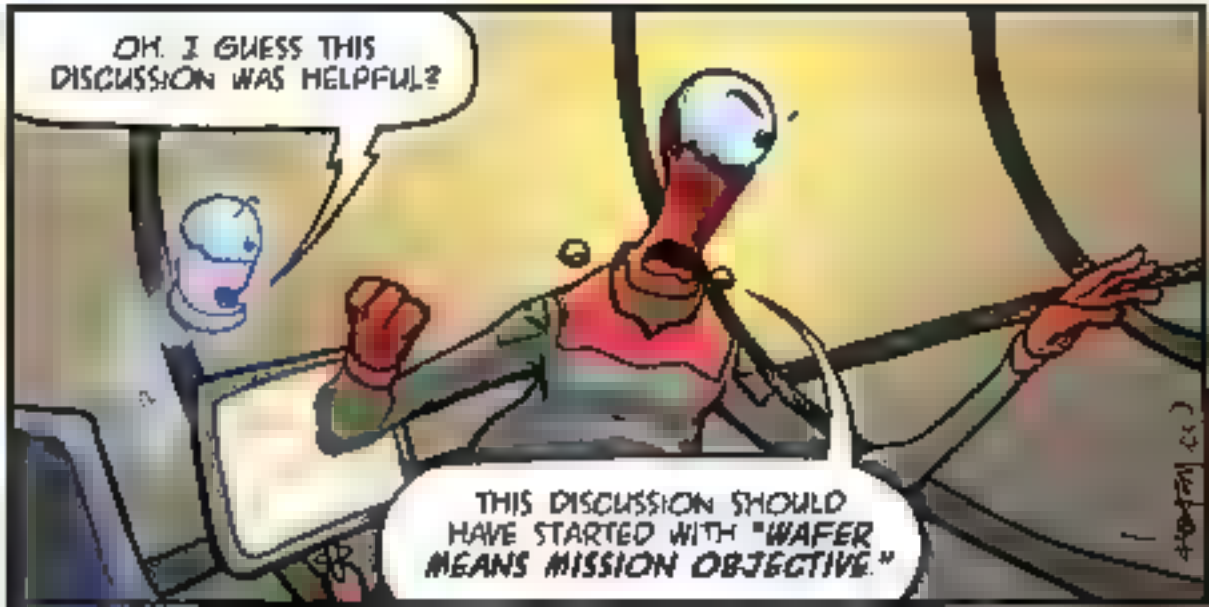
HOW MANY IS "QUITE A LOT?"
IF YOU HAVE TO ASK, THERE ARE ALMOST CERTAINLY TOO MANY

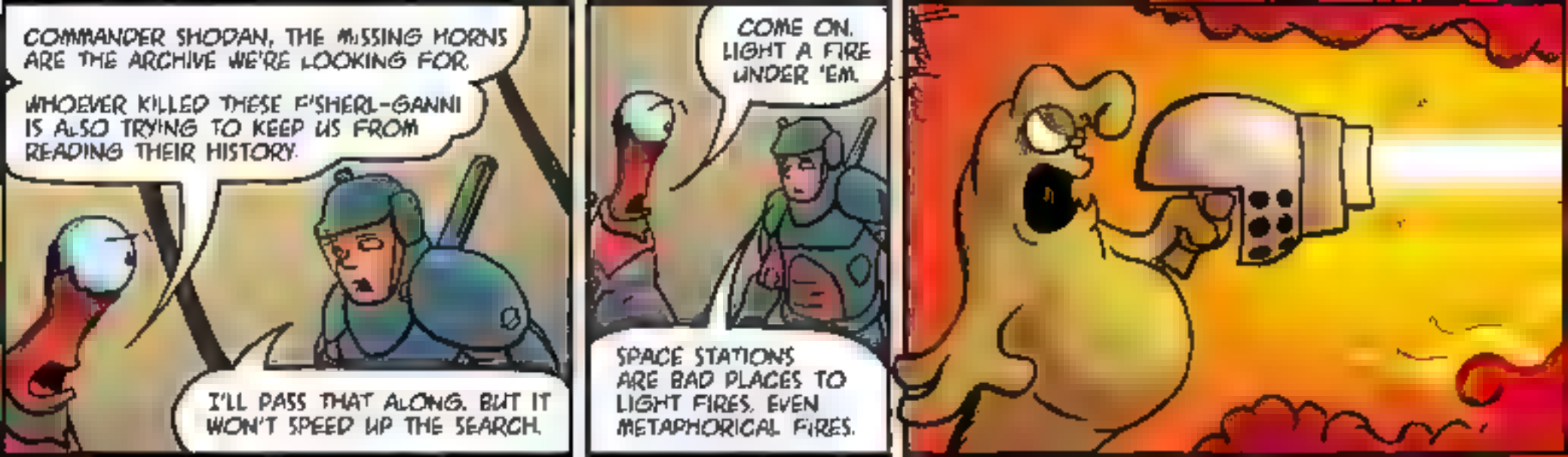

DEBRIEFING
I TOLD YAEYOEFUI THAT I NEEDED SLEEP HE EXPRESSED SYMPATHY FOR THE FLAWS IN MY EVOLUTIONARY PEDIGREE.
WE LISTENED IN.
OF COURSE YOU DID
IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'D CARE TO ADD? YOUR INSIGHTS ARE CRITICAL HERE
WHEN I TOLD THE LIBRARIAN I NEEDED SLEEP, IT WAS BECAUSE I NEED SLEEP.
YOU REALLY OUGHT TO GIVE CAPTAIN SORLIE A RAISE.
I'M WITH THE GOVERNMENT, LANDON. I CAN'T PAY PEOPLE WHAT THEY'RE WORTH.


I'VE BEEN CONTEMPLATING MOTIVE AFTER A BIT OF DIGGING, I FOUND A FOOTNOTE THAT SUGGESTS THAT F'SHERL-GANN HORNS ARE WAFERS, SO PERHAPS
SLOW DOWN. "WAFERS?"
W.A.F.R.
IT'S A WOM IMPLEMENTATION.
SO, NOT COOKIES.
W.A.F.R. STANDS FOR "WRITE-AND-FORGET REGISTER." IT'S A WRITE-ONLY MEMORY SYSTEM FOR DATA NOBODY NEEDS, BUT THAT NOBODY WANTS TO LOSE

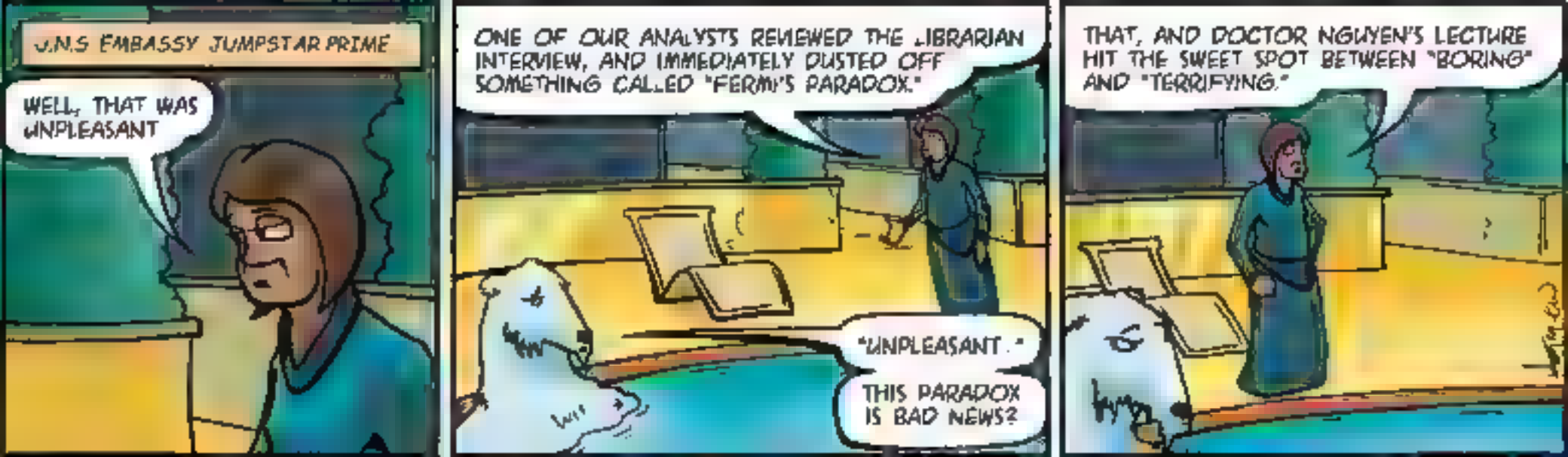

OH, FOR THE LOVE OF BLOODY, BLINKING SAND.

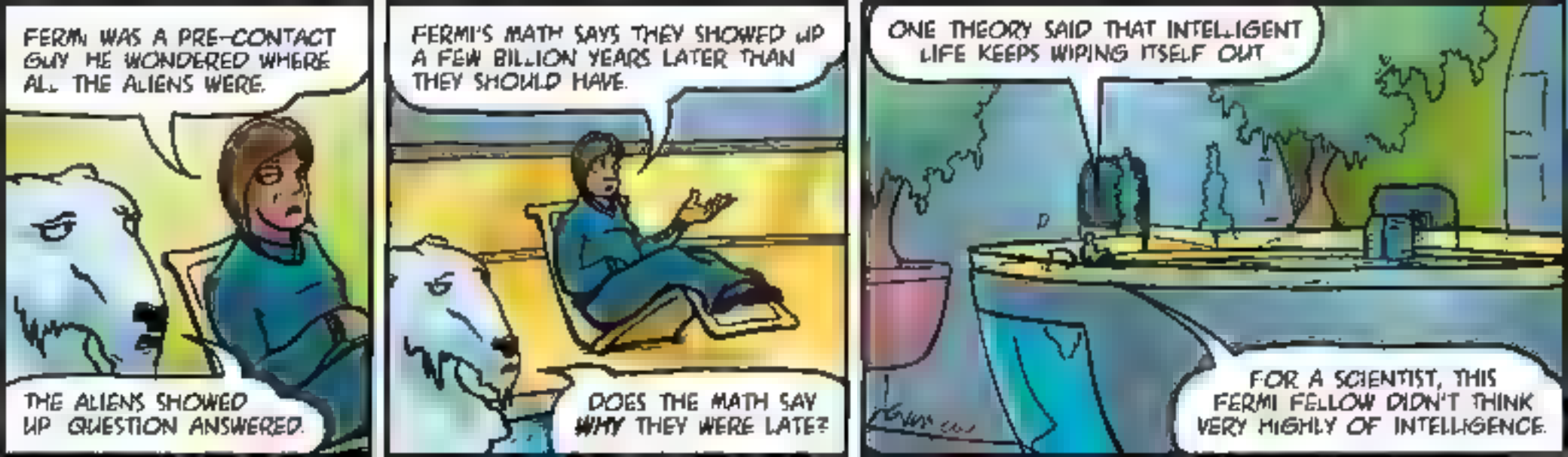

THE AMPUTATED HORNS ARE THE ARCHIVE WE'RE SUPPOSED TO RECOVER.


OH. I GUESS THIS DISCUSSION WAS HELPFUL?
THIS DISCUSSION SHOULD HAVE STARTED WITH "WAFER MEANS MISSION OBJECTIVE."


COMMANDER SHODAN, THE MISSING HORNS ARE THE ARCHIVE WE'RE LOOKING FOR.
WHOEVER KILLED THESE F'SHERL-GANNI IS ALSO TRYING TO KEEP US FROM READING THEIR HISTORY.
I'LL PASS THAT ALONG. BUT IT WON'T SPEED UP THE SEARCH.
COME ON. LIGHT A FIRE UNDER 'EM.
SPACE STATIONS ARE BAD PLACES TO LIGHT FIRES. EVEN METAPHORICAL FIRES.

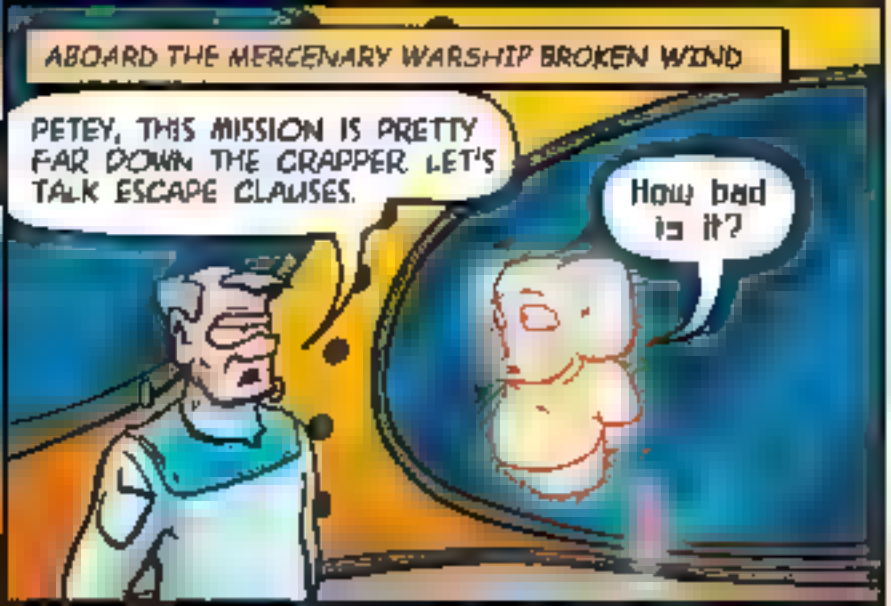
COMMANDER, THE THERMAL SEARCH IS A BUST WE'VE BEEN ASSUMING WE COULD SEE THROUGH BULKHEADS, BUT THE BULKHEADS ARE LACED WITH SUPERCONDUCTORS.
WHO FIGURED THAT OUT?
DON'T ANSWER LET ME GUESS... THE SERGEANT TOOK OUT A BULKHEAD WITH HIS PLASGUN.
CLOSE THE SERGEANT TOOK HIS FRUSTRATION OUT ON A BULKHEAD WITH HIS PLASGUN.
Can we get moving? The floor is really warm.


U.N.S EMBASSY JUMPSTAR PRIME
WELL, THAT WAS UNPLEASANT
ONE OF OUR ANALYSTS REVIEWED THE LIBRARIAN INTERVIEW, AND IMMEDIATELY DUSTED OFF SOMETHING CALLED "FERMI'S PARADOX."
"UNPLEASANT."
THIS PARADOX IS BAD NEWS?
THAT, AND DOCTOR NGUYEN'S LECTURE HIT THE SWEET SPOT BETWEEN "BORING" AND "TERRIFYING."


FERMI WAS A PRE-CONTACT GUY. HE WONDERED WHERE ALL THE ALIENS WERE.
THE ALIENS SHOWED UP. QUESTION ANSWERED.
FERMI'S MATH SAYS THEY SHOWED UP A FEW BILLION YEARS LATER THAN THEY SHOULD HAVE.
DOES THE MATH SAY *WHY* THEY WERE LATE?
ONE THEORY SAID THAT INTELLIGENT LIFE KEEPS WIPING ITSELF OUT.
FOR A SCIENTIST, THIS FERMI FELLOW DIDN'T THINK VERY HIGHLY OF INTELLIGENCE.

LIVING IN A BUSTLING GALACTIC CULTURE. IT'S EASY TO ASSUME THINGS WILL JUST KEEP GROWING
BUT WHAT IF THEY WON'T? WHAT IF THE EXTINCTIONS THAT LIE BEHIND US ARE SOMEHOW SCHEDULED TO REPEAT THEMSELVES?
SUPPOSE THEY LIE IN FRONT OF US, READY TO WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN FOR THE NEXT GALACTIC CIVILIZATION.
HOW DO WE DEFEND AGAINST THAT?
SHOW ME WHAT TO KILL, MA'AM. I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT
YOUR TIMING IS THE VERY OXIDE OF IRONY I WAS JUST GETTING TO THAT BIT

WE'VE EXPLORED VAST SWATHS OF THE GALAXY THE ONLY THING CAPABLE OF MAKING MASS EXTINCTIONS HAPPEN ON THE SCALE OF FERMI'S PARADOX IS INTELLIGENT LIFE.
AND THE PROBLEM, THE REAL PROBLEM, MAY BE THAT THE ONLY SOLUTION IS A MILITARY ONE.
CAPTAIN LANDON?
STILL PARSING.
TAKE YOUR TIME. I BET YOU'VE GOT MILLIONS OF YEARS BEFORE WE ALL KILL EACH OTHER.

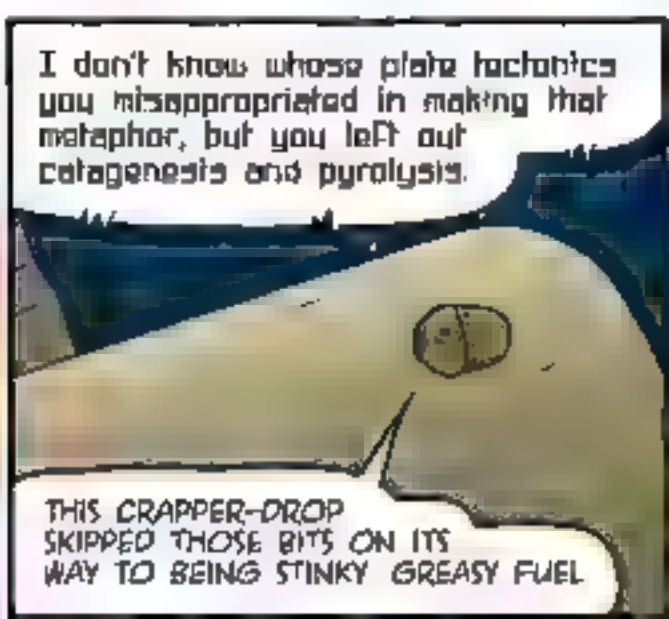

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP BROKEN WIND
PETEY, THIS MISSION IS PRETTY FAR DOWN THE CRAPPER. LET'S TALK ESCAPE CLAUSES.
How bad is it?

WHEN WE GOT HERE, EVERYBODY WAS DEAD. WE HAVEN'T FOUND A LIVING SOUL ANYWHERE.
AS "GOOD WILL" MISSIONS GO, THIS ONE'S SO FAR DOWN THE CRAPPER IT'S COMPOST.

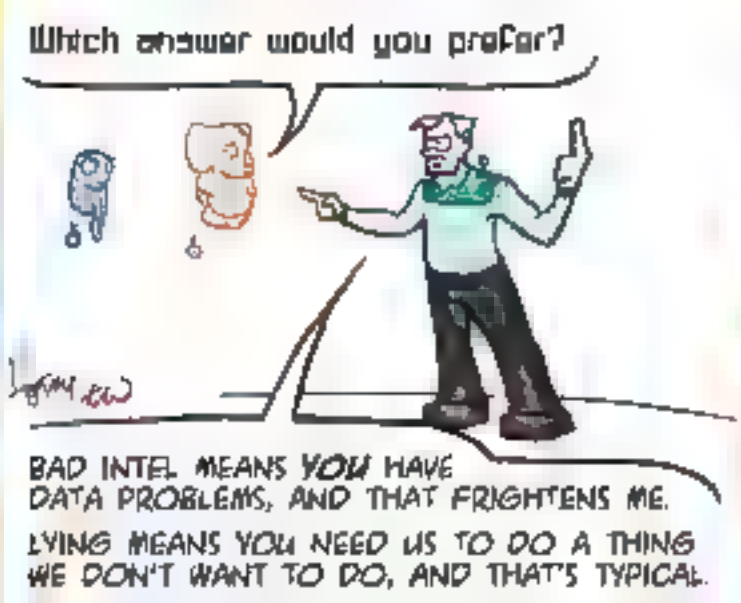
What about the archive? Have you found it?
YOU MEAN THE MISSING HORNS OF THE DEAD?
THOSE HAVE BEEN AMPUTATED, AND ARE STILL MISSING.
Who said the archive was in F'shart-Ganni horns?
WHO SAID IT ISN'T?
CERTAINLY NOT YOU.
YOU PITCHED THIS GIG AS "SHOW UP, BE NICE, OFFER ASSISTANCE, AND ASK TO LOOK AT THE ARCHIVES."

IN REALITY, THIS MISSION HAS BEEN "SHOW UP, BE HORRIFIED, GET ASSISTANCE FROM A HOMICIDE DETECTIVE, AND ASK OURSELVES WHY WE'RE HERE."
I can see why you're upset.

I MISSPOKE REGARDING THE DEPTH OF THIS CRAPPER-DROP. THIS MISSION HAS SUNK PAST COMPOST, AND IS NOW BEING PRESSED INTO PETROLEUM UNDER SOME CONTINENTAL PLATES.


I don't know whose plate tectonics you misappropriated in making that metaphor, but you left out catagenesis and pyrolysis.
THIS CRAPPER-DROP SKIPPED THOSE BITS ON ITS WAY TO BEING STINKY GREASY FUEL.

The kill fee is already in your account, Commodore, so you can back out now.
If that's what you want.
WHAT I *WANT* IS TO KNOW IF YOU LIED TO US, OR IF YOU SIMPLY HAD BAD INTEL.


Which answer would you prefer?
BAD INTEL MEANS *YOU* HAVE DATA PROBLEMS, AND THAT FRIGHTENS ME.
LYING MEANS YOU NEED US TO DO A THING WE DON'T WANT TO DO, AND THAT'S TYPICAL.

So if my intel was bad, the lie you want to hear is that I lied to you about the mission.
I AM SORRY I EVER TOLD YOU WHAT I WANT

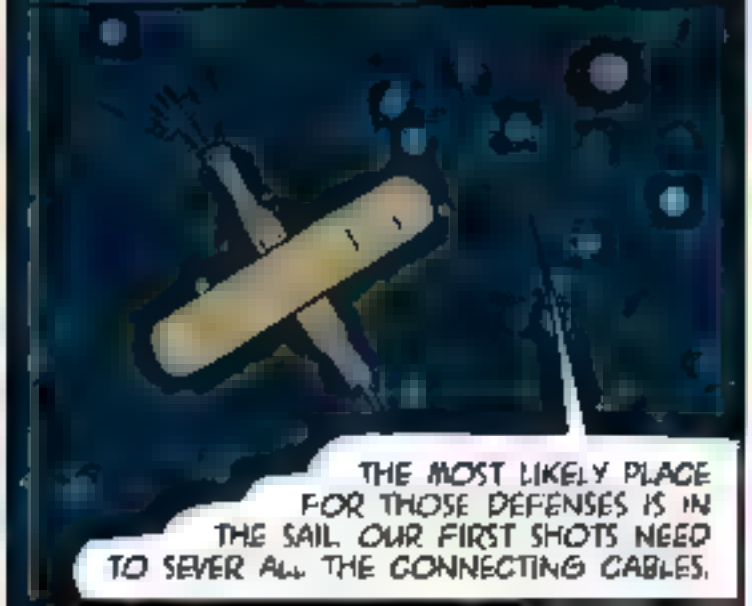
My intel was full of holes. Even under my thumb the F'Shori-Ganni are quite good at keeping secrets.
I WILL GRANT THAT THE WORST SERIAL MURDERERS IN THE HISTORY OF EVER ARE PROBABLY GOOD AT KEEPING SECRETS.
Well, they're good at it because they keep secrets from each other. They orphan data, and then lose it, and they do this on purpose. It is an outrage.
YOU SEEM MORE OUTRAGED BY WHAT THEY DO TO DATA THAN WHAT THEY'VE DONE TO LIVING BEINGS.
I love all kinds of data, and living beings are data that make more data.
YOU'RE NOT MAKING ME FEEL ANY LESS LIKE QUITTING THIS JOB.

PETEY THIS PLACE IS THE SIZE OF A CITY WITHOUT A LOCAL GUIDE THE ONLY WAY TO FIND ANYTHING IS TO LITERALLY TEAR THE HABITAT APART, BULKHEAD BY BULKHEAD
When the residents were still alive, that option was not on the table.
I WOULD LIKE TO LEARN ABOUT ANY NEW THINGS ON THIS TABLE OF WHICH YOU SPEAK.

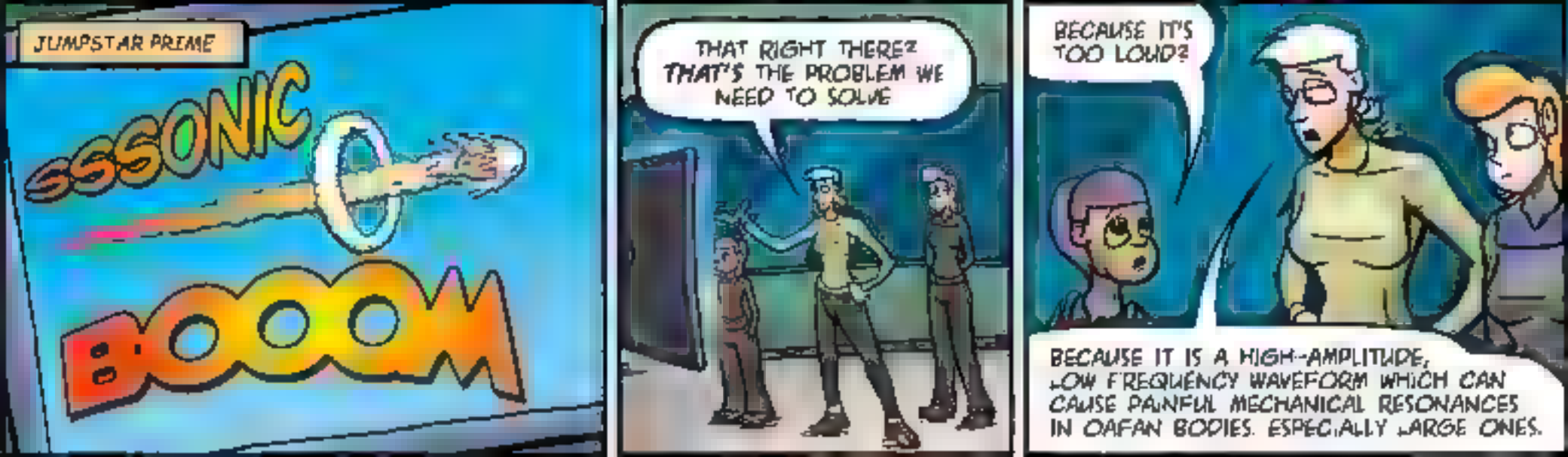
ONE "TABLE-OPTIONS" DISCUSSION LATER
PULL EVERYBODY BACK TO SECTORS ONE AND TWO. DROP DISPOSABLE SENSORS EVERY FIFTY METERS.
THE KILL FEE CLEARED OUR ACCOUNT ARE WE OUT OF HERE?
NOPE
IT ISN'T IN ENOUGH PIECES YET
LOVELIER WORDS WILL NEVER BE SPOKEN.
I WAS WRONG
WE'LL BE USING THE SHIP'S WEAPONS FOR THIS PROJECT

ANDREYASN, EBBIRNOTH, AND PIBALD WILL COME UP WITH A DEMOLITION PLAN.
THE CUTS NEED TO BE CLEAN WHEN THIS THING COMES APART. WE HAVE TO IDENTIFY ALL THE PIECES.
SEARCH-AND-RESCUE IS EVERYBODY'S JOB. ANYTHING ALIVE IS TO BE PRESSURE-BAGGED WITHIN THIRTY SECONDS.
THAT'S IT. TELL ME WHAT I'VE MISSED.
DUNNO, BUT I'VE MISSED THIS KIND OF WORK.

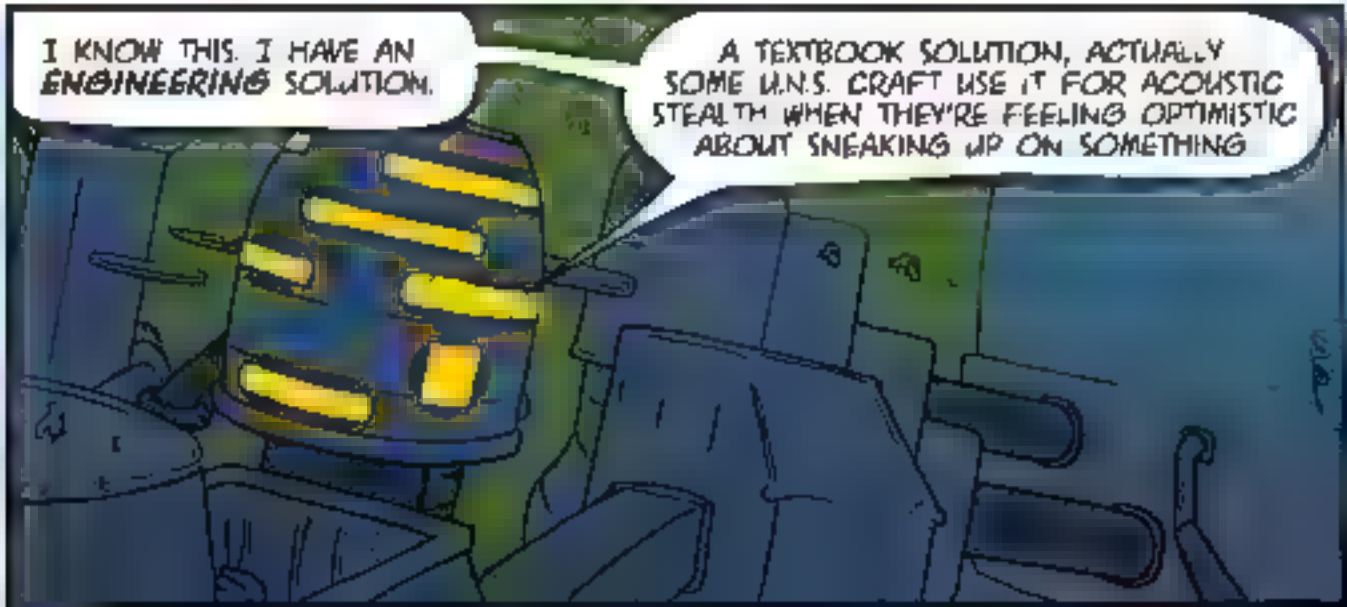
WE MAY WAKE UP SOME HIDDEN, AUTOMATED DEFENSES WHEN WE START FIRING
SUGGESTIONS?

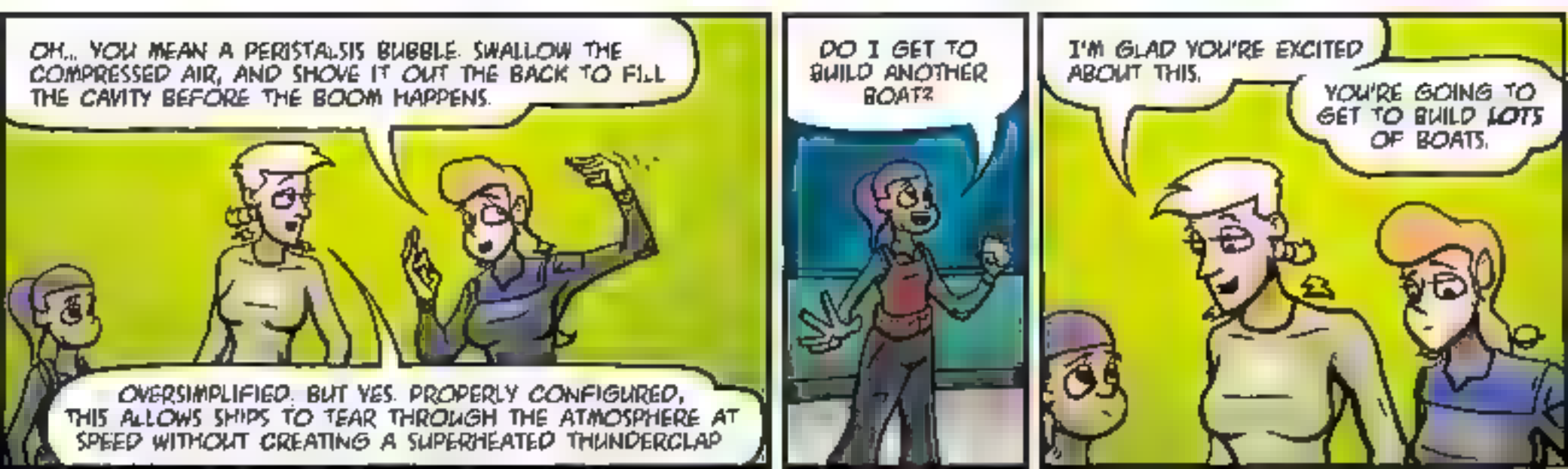

THE MOST LIKELY PLACE FOR THOSE DEFENSES IS IN THE SAIL. OUR FIRST SHOTS NEED TO SEVER ALL THE CONNECTING CABLES.

THAT SOUNDS LIKE A NICE POINT OF NO RETURN.
NO RETURN FIRE IS THE POINT


JUMPSTAR PRIME
SSSONIC
BOOOM
THAT RIGHT THERE? THAT'S THE PROBLEM WE NEED TO SOLVE
BECAUSE IT'S TOO LOUD?
BECAUSE IT IS A HIGH-AMPLITUDE, LOW FREQUENCY WAVEFORM WHICH CAN CAUSE PAINFUL MECHANICAL RESONANCES IN OAFAN BODIES. ESPECIALLY LARGE ONES.

SO, IT'S TOO LOUD.
WE'RE NOT THE PEOPLE WHO CAN PASS LAWS THAT SAY "DON'T GO TOO FAST"


I KNOW THIS. I HAVE AN ENGINEERING SOLUTION.
A TEXTBOOK SOLUTION, ACTUALLY SOME U.N.S. CRAFT USE IT FOR ACOUSTIC STEALTH WHEN THEY'RE FEELING OPTIMISTIC ABOUT SNEAKING UP ON SOMETHING


OH... YOU MEAN A PERISTALSIS BUBBLE. SWALLOW THE COMPRESSED AIR, AND SHOVE IT OUT THE BACK TO FILL THE CAVITY BEFORE THE BOOM HAPPENS.
OVERSIMPLIFIED. BUT YES. PROPERLY CONFIGURED, THIS ALLOWS SHIPS TO TEAR THROUGH THE ATMOSPHERE AT SPEED WITHOUT CREATING A SUPERHEATED THUNDERCLAP
DO I GET TO BUILD ANOTHER BOAT?
I'M GLAD YOU'RE EXCITED ABOUT THIS.
YOU'RE GOING TO GET TO BUILD LOTS OF BOATS.

YOU KEEP SAYING "BOAT" BROKEN WIND HAS A BIG ENOUGH ANNIE TO DO A PERISTALSIS BUBBLE, BUT SHE'S BATTLESHIP-SIZED

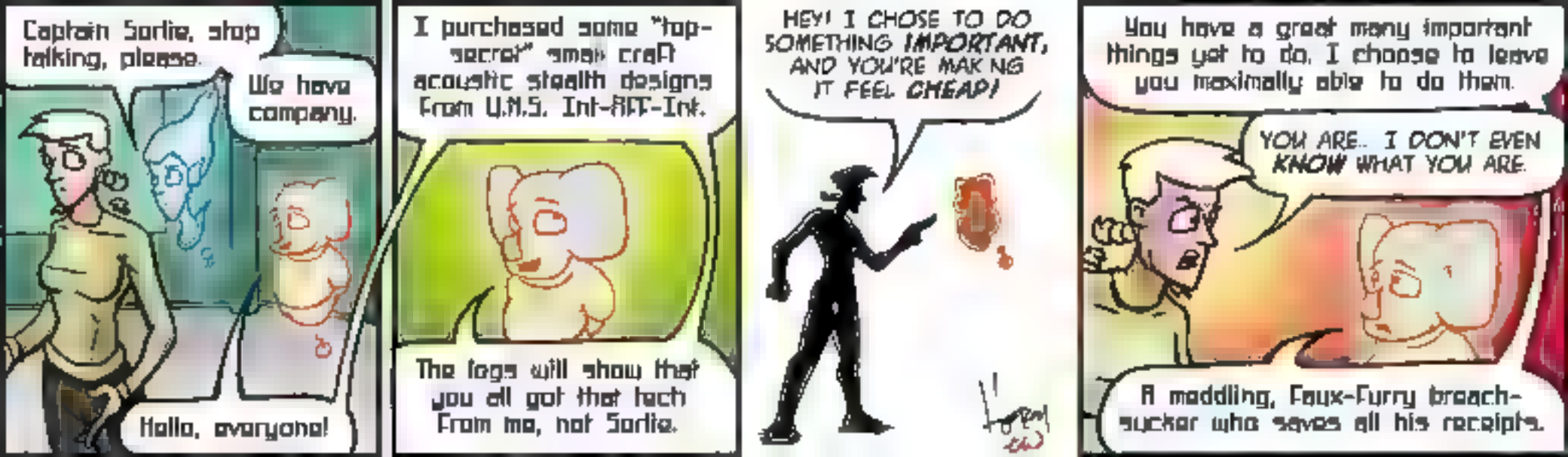
TRUE. IF WE'RE GOING TO CREATE PERISTALSIS RETROFIT KITS FOR VEHICLES TOOLING AROUND INSIDE EINA-AFA, WE HAVE TO FAKE THE FINESSE OF A BIG ANNIE WITH SEVERAL SMALL, SINGLE-PURPOSE ANNIES.

I HAD NO IDEA THAT COULD BE DONE.

TECHNICALLY, THIS DESIGN IS U.N.S. CLASSIFIED SECRET SOME-SUCH.

TECHNICALLY?

TECHNICALLY, I DON'T *HAVE* TO GO BACK TO U.N.S. SOU-


Captain Sorlie, stop talking, please.
We have company.
Hello, everyone!
I purchased some "top-secret" small craft acoustic stealth designs from U.N.S. Int-Art-Int.
The logs will show that you all got that tech from me, not Sorlie.
HEY! I CHOSE TO DO SOMETHING IMPORTANT, AND YOU'RE MAKING IT FEEL CHEAP!
You have a great many important things yet to do. I choose to leave you maximally able to do them.
YOU ARE... I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU ARE.
A meddling, Faux-Furry breach-sucker who saves all his receipts.

OBVIOUSLY *I'M* NOT NEEDED HERE ANYMORE. *NONE* OF US ARE. LET *BUILD-IT BEAR* DO EVERYTHING.

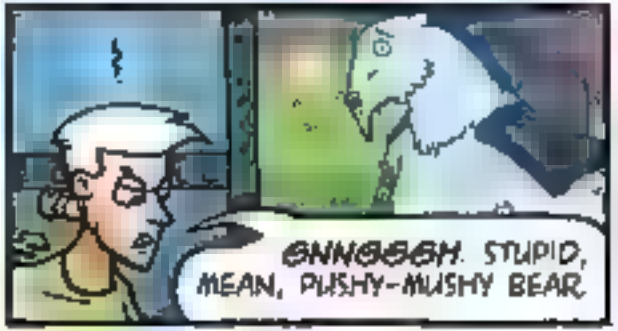
Not actually a bear

NOT ACTUALLY *CARE*

ERR... CARING.

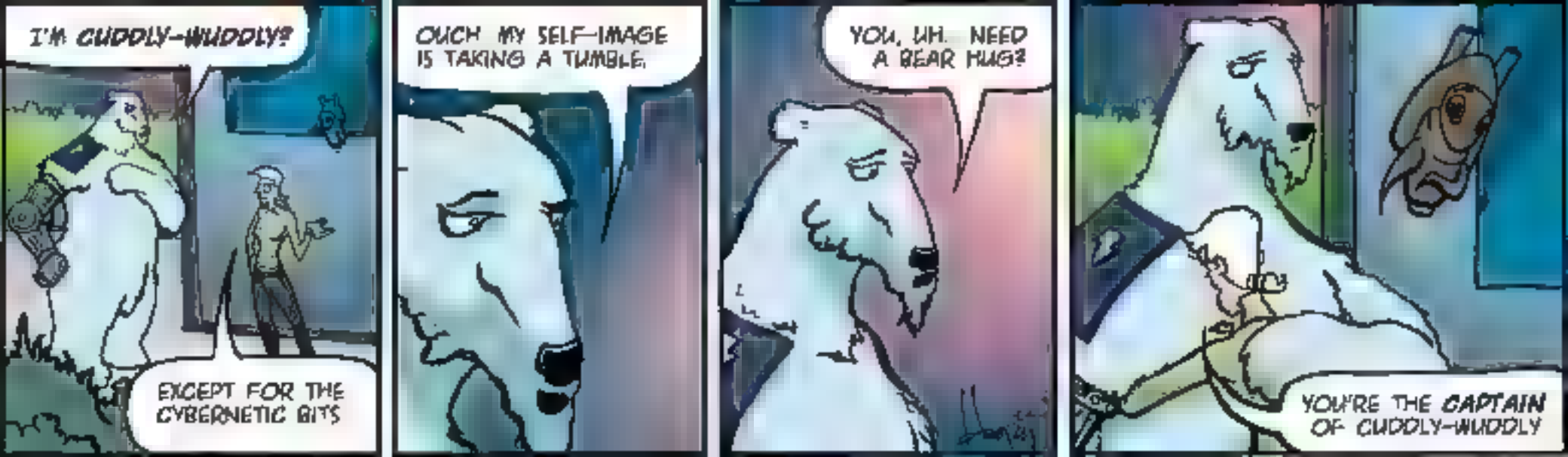
WHATEVER.

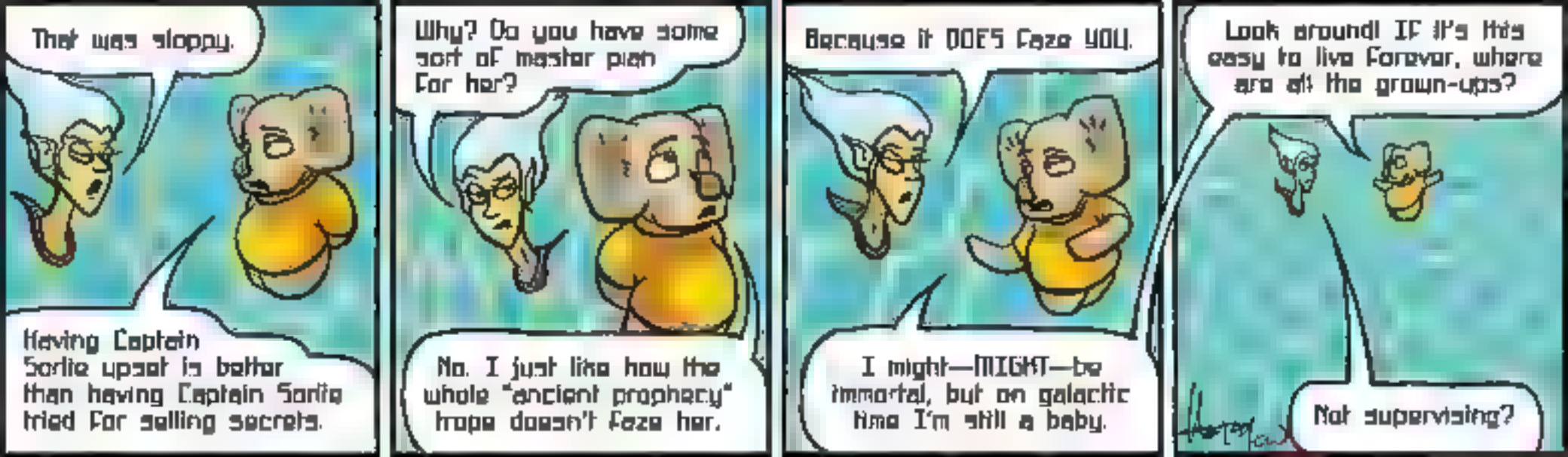
BEAR, NOT BEAR, DON'T CARE.



CAN YOU START OVER FROM THE BIT WHERE I'M SURE *I'M* NOT THE BEAR WHO IS PUSHY-MUSHY?

YOU'RE CUDDLY-WUDDLY


I'M CUDDLY-WUDDLY?
EXCEPT FOR THE CYBERNETIC BITS
OUCH MY SELF-IMAGE IS TAKING A TUMBLE.
YOU, UH. NEED A BEAR HUG?
YOU'RE THE CAPTAIN OF CUDDLY-WUDDLY


That was sloppy.
Having Captain Sorlie upset is better than having Captain Sorlie tried for selling secrets.
Why? Do you have some sort of master plan for her?
No. I just like how the whole "ancient prophecy" trope doesn't faze her.
Because it DOES faze YOU.
I might—MIGHT—be immortal, but on galactic time I'm still a baby.
Look around! If it's this easy to live forever, where are all the grown-ups?
Not supervising?

Extinctions are a matter of record, but Gale-Amin overestimates the ability of sophonts to wipe themselves al the way out
"Sophont" being a category that, for the purposes of that sentience, does not include you.
Exactly!
I don't want to be the reason intelligence goes extinct again, but I'm the best reason I can think of.
Maybe have a nice chat with the Reverend?
Meh. I already know what he'll say once he stops screaming.

BROKEN WIND

THOSE CABLES DISSIPATE HEAT QUICKLY BUT THEY SHATTER JUST FINE.

Broadband transmission, audio only. This is live.

... CAN'T STOP ME! I NEED NO CABLES TO BREAK THE CHAINS!

IAFA, TRANSMIT A REPLY, SAME BANDS.

WE HEAR YOU. WHERE ARE YOU? WE NEED TO GET YOU OFF THIS STATION.

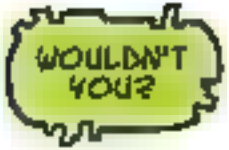
Handshake complete. We're connected. Real-time comms are up.

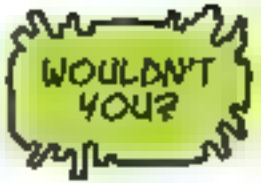
BOUND TO THE STAR, BOUND TO THE PAST, BOUND BOUND BOUND!

THAT'S NOT ACTUALLY A LOCATION.
WHERE ARE YOU?

YOU WOULD KNOW MY LOCATION?

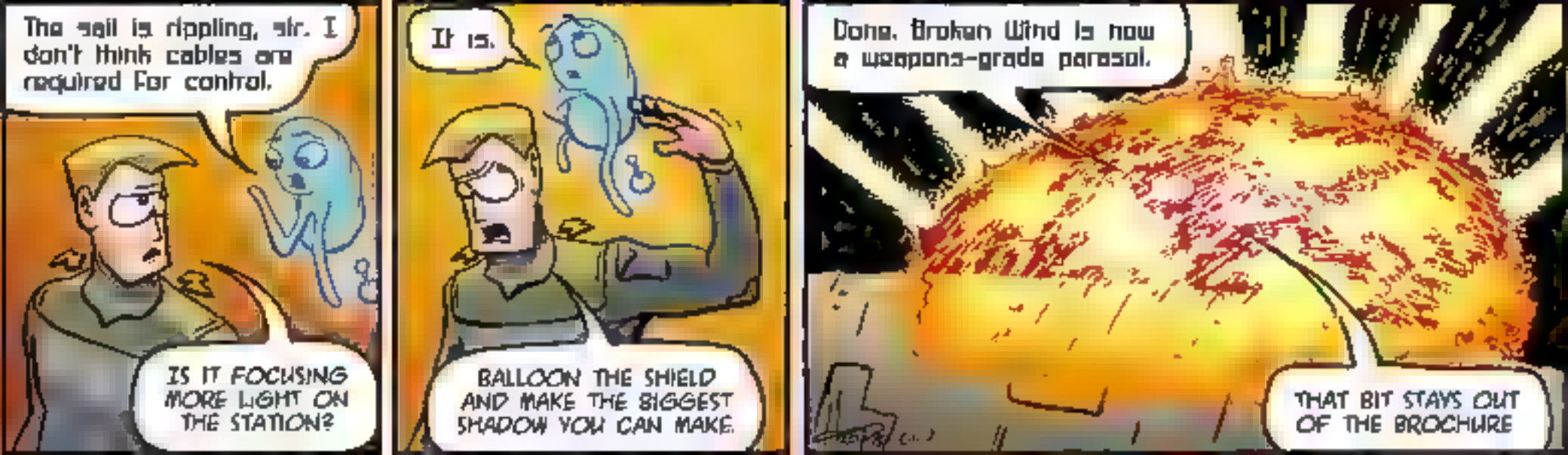
UMM... YEAH. WE WOULD


WOULDN'T YOU?

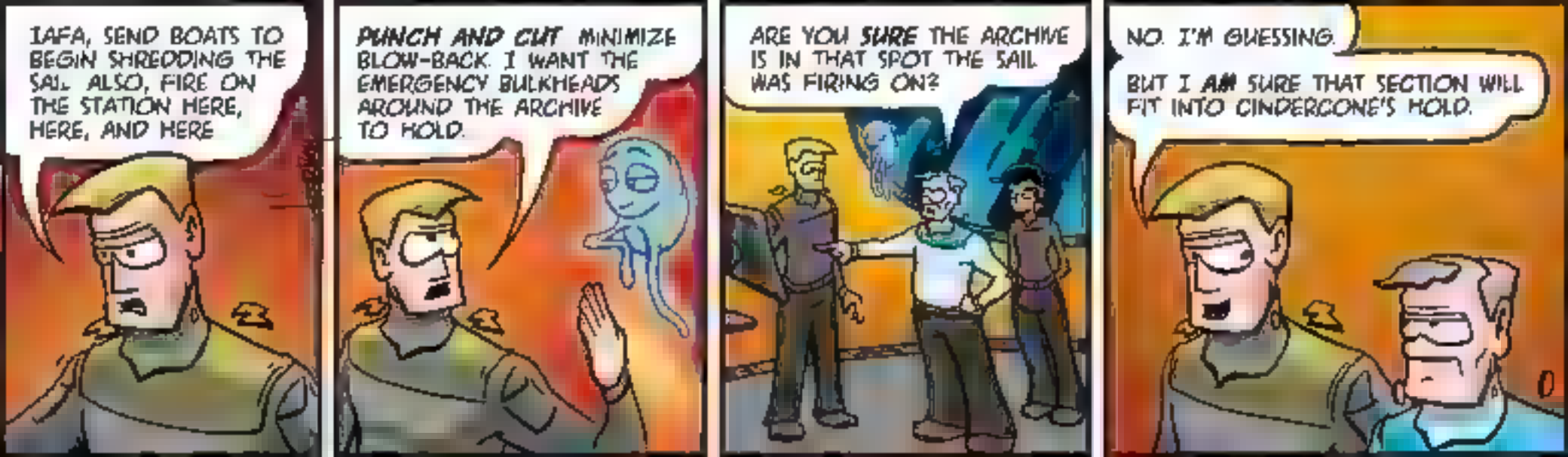

WOULDN'T YOU?

WOULDN'T YOU RATHER OBSERVE MY VELOCITY?

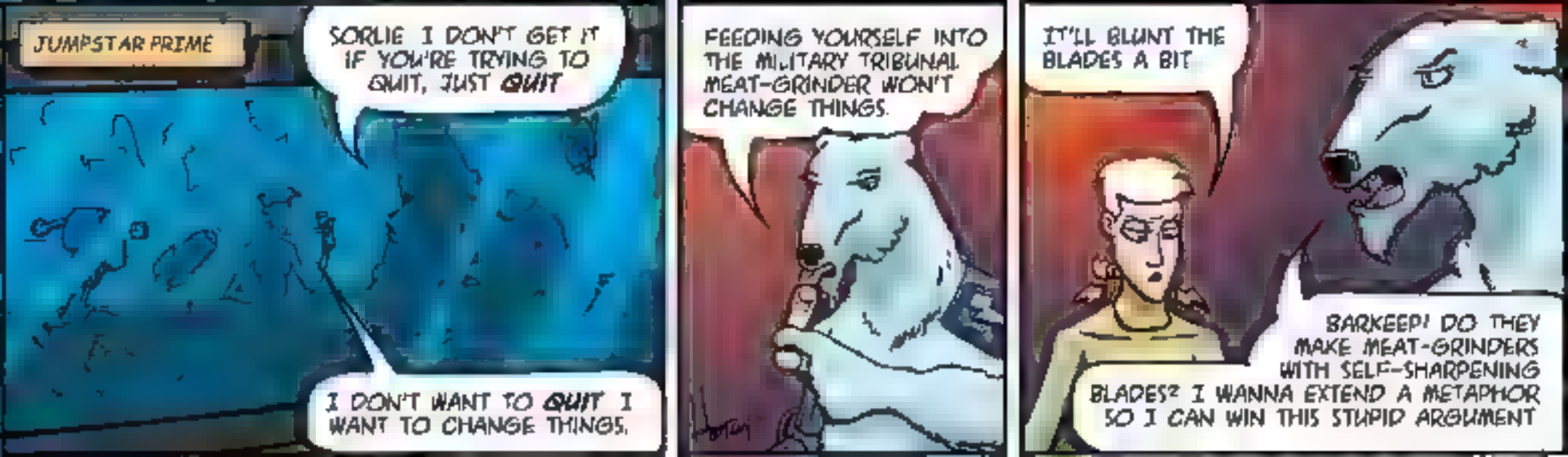
I THINK THAT WAS A QUANTUM MECHANICS JOKE.
I THINK I WANT TO KNOW THEIR LOCATION AND THEIR VELOCITY.


The sail is rippling, sir. I don't think cables are required for control.
IS IT FOCUSING MORE LIGHT ON THE STATION?
It is.
BALLOON THE SHIELD AND MAKE THE BIGGEST SHADOW YOU CAN MAKE.
Done. Broken Wind is now a weapons-grade parasol.
THAT BIT STAYS OUT OF THE BROCHURE

The sail is attempting to concentrate its fire on one side of section 14.
THE STATION HAS EMERGENCY BULKHEADS ON ALL SIDES OF THAT AREA.
HEY, REMEMBER WHEN I SUGGESTED WE SHOOT OUR WAY IN, GRAB THE ARCHIVE, AND BURN THE POD TO ASHES ON OUR WAY OUT?


IAFA, SEND BOATS TO BEGIN SHREDDING THE SAIL. ALSO, FIRE ON THE STATION HERE, HERE, AND HERE
PUNCH AND CUT MINIMIZE BLOW-BACK. I WANT THE EMERGENCY BULKHEADS AROUND THE ARCHIVE TO HOLD.
ARE YOU SURE THE ARCHIVE IS IN THAT SPOT THE SAIL WAS FIRING ON?
NO. I'M GUESSING.
BUT I AM SURE THAT SECTION WILL FIT INTO CINDERCONE'S HOLD.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
CUTTING YOUR SECTION FREE OF THE STATION, AND THEN TAKING YOU WITH US.
I KNOW I KNOW I KNOW THAT I MEANT DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING?
RARELY OUR NEW MANUALS MOSTLY FOCUS ON KNOWING HOW WE DO IT
THAT BIT STAYS OUT OF THE BROCHURE, TOO.


JUMPSTAR PRIME
SORLIE I DON'T GET IT IF YOU'RE TRYING TO QUIT, JUST QUIT
I DON'T WANT TO QUIT I WANT TO CHANGE THINGS.
FEEDING YOURSELF INTO THE MILITARY TRIBUNAL MEAT-GRINDER WON'T CHANGE THINGS.
IT'LL BLUNT THE BLADES A BIT
BARKEEP! DO THEY MAKE MEAT-GRINDERS WITH SELF-SHARPENING BLADES? I WANNA EXTEND A METAPHOR SO I CAN WIN THIS STUPID ARGUMENT

SORLIE, YOU *ARE* CHANGING THINGS. CAN'T YOU SEE THAT?

MAYBE I *CAN'T*

MAYBE IT'S LIKE I "CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES."

THE BIG CHANGES ARE OBVIOUS, SURE, BUT I CAN'T SEE HOW INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY BENEFITTING FROM THE TOP-SECRET CRAP I'M *AGAIN* EMBEDDED IN.

HRRRMMMKAY, THAT MAKES SENSE.

EXCEPT IN YOUR CASE THE METAPHOR IS UPSIDE DOWN. YOU'RE NOT SEEING THE *TREES* BECAUSE OF THE *FOREST*

WHATEVER. IT DOESN'T MATTER.

IT MATTERS TO *ME*. IT'S A FOREST METAPHOR, AND I'M A *BEAR*.

A *POLAR* BEAR.

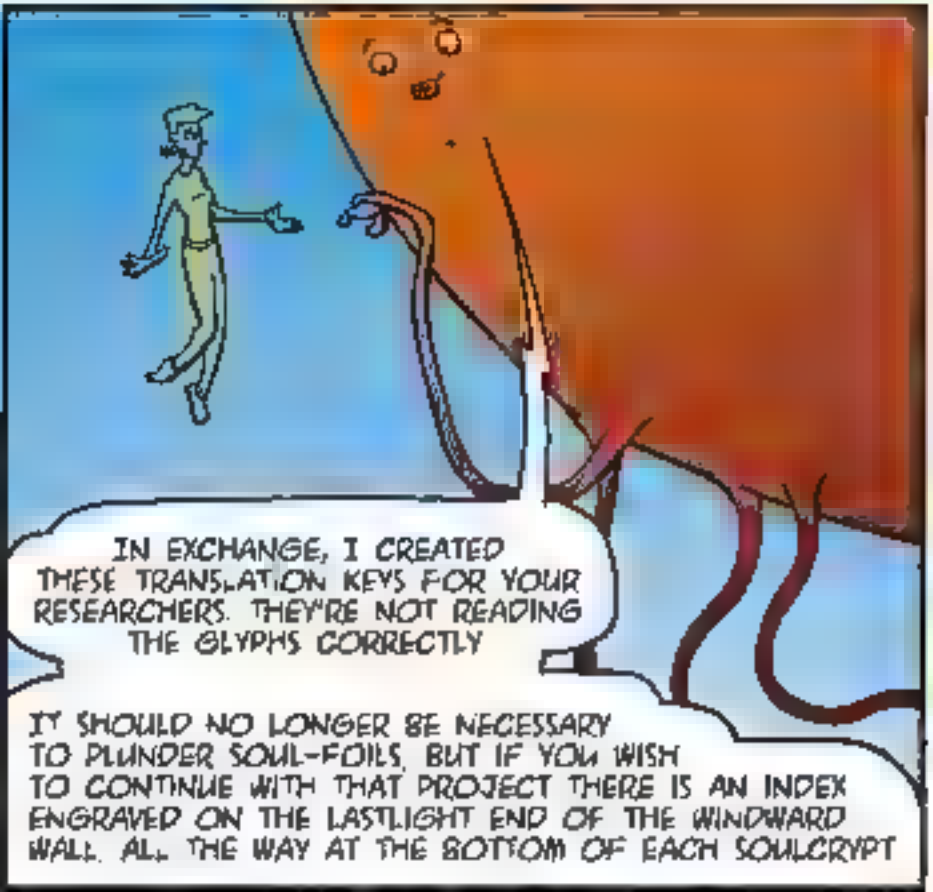
RAISED IN A GIANT *CITY*

IN THE *MIDDLE OF AN OCEAN*.

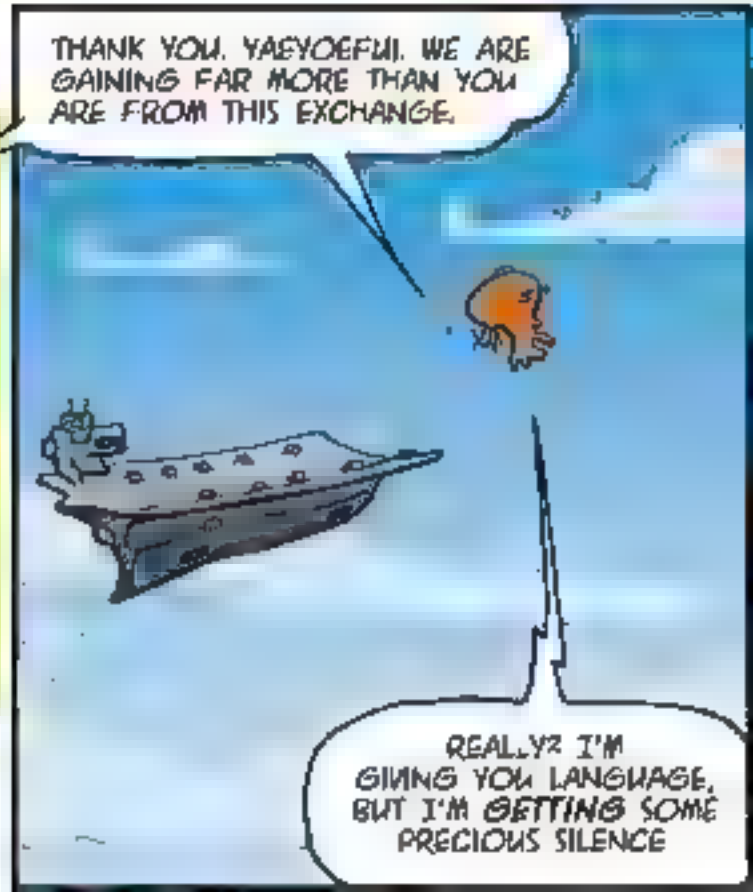
BARKEEP! MY FRIEND ISN'T DRUNK ENOUGH TO AGREE WITH ME YET!

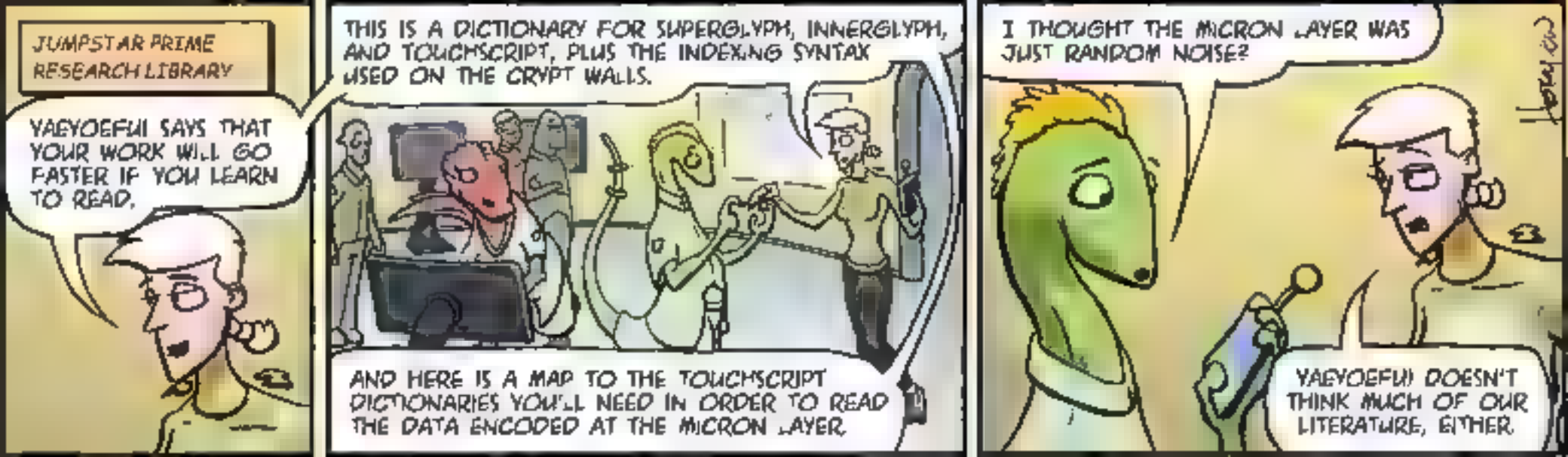
THE NEXT MORNING IN THE SKIES ABOVE JUMPSTAR PRIME
SILENCE

AND THAT IS HOW MUCH NOISE THE PERISTALSIS DRIVES MAKE.
I HEAR ONLY THE SUGGESTION OF A WHISPER OF A DISTANT BREATH.
THANK YOU.

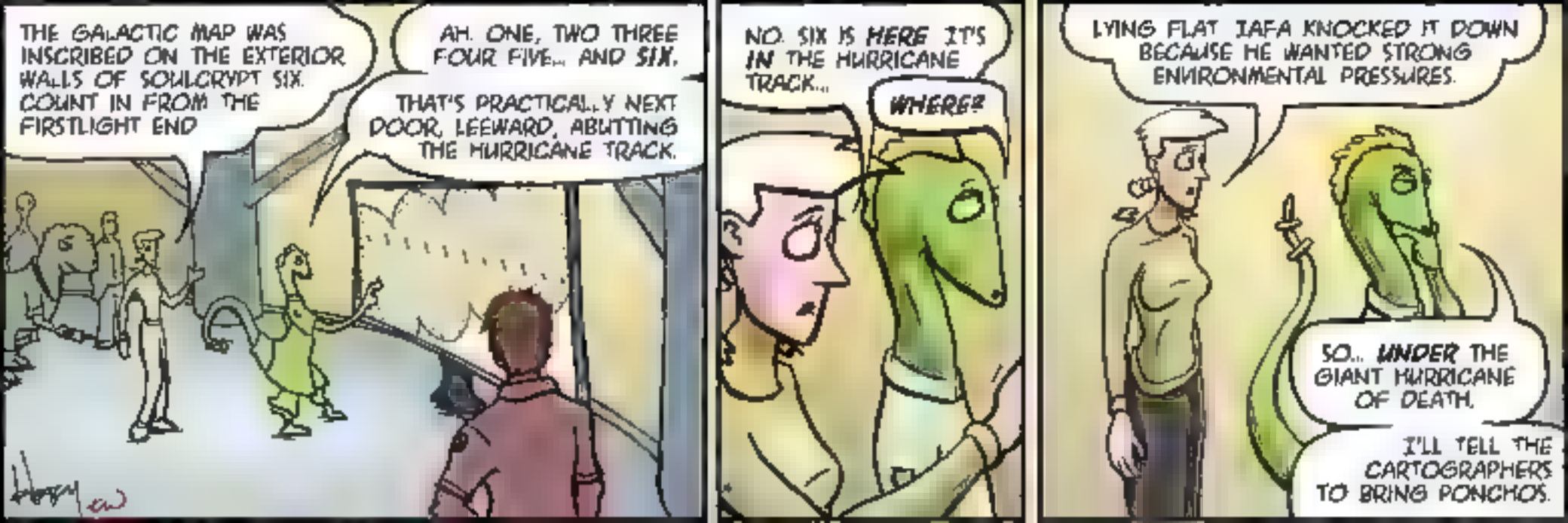

IN EXCHANGE, I CREATED THESE TRANSLATION KEYS FOR YOUR RESEARCHERS. THEY'RE NOT READING THE GLYPHS CORRECTLY
IT SHOULD NO LONGER BE NECESSARY TO PLUNDER SOUL-FOILS, BUT IF YOU WISH TO CONTINUE WITH THAT PROJECT THERE IS AN INDEX ENGRAVED ON THE LASTLIGHT END OF THE WINDWARD WALL. ALL THE WAY AT THE BOTTOM OF EACH SOULCRYPT

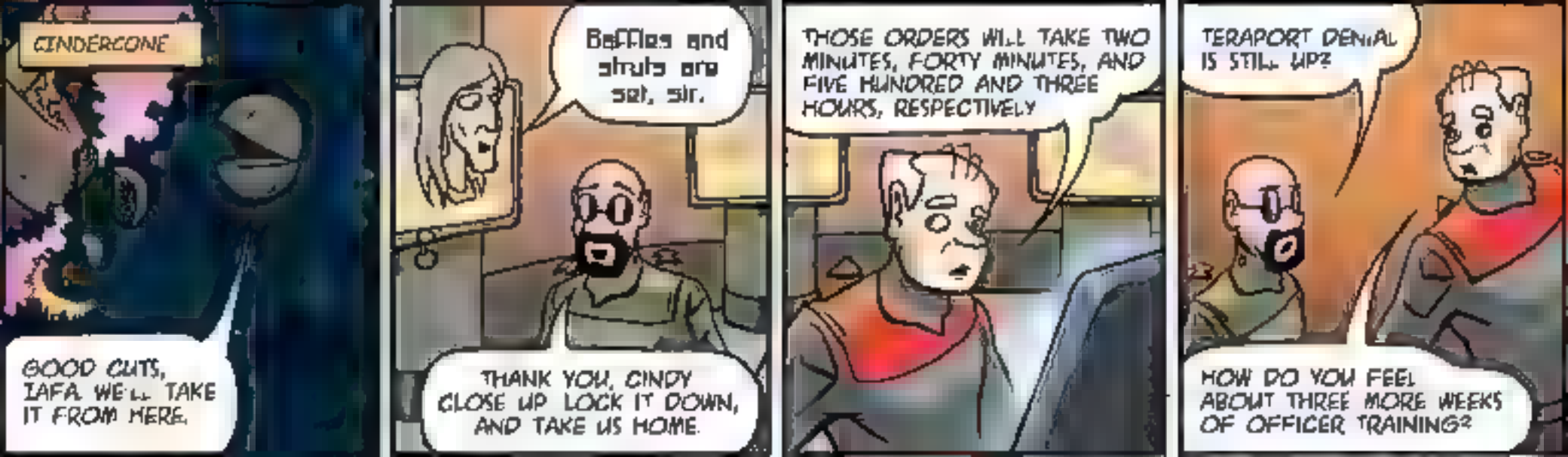
YOU WROTE AN ENTIRE DICTIONARY!

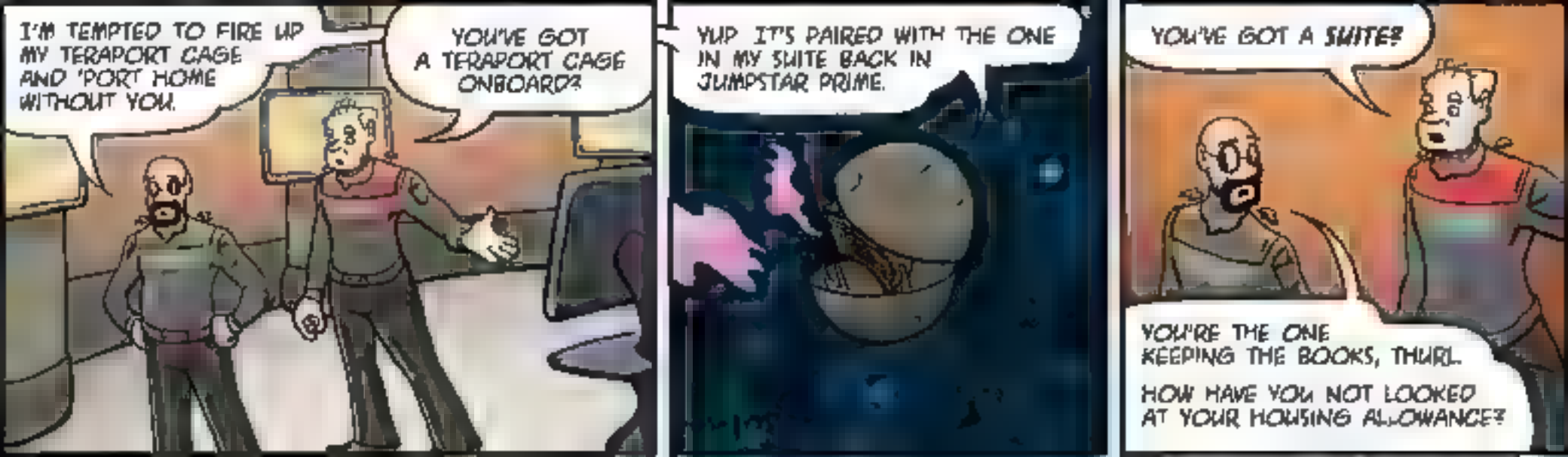

THANK YOU, YAEYOEFUI. WE ARE GAINING FAR MORE THAN YOU ARE FROM THIS EXCHANGE.
REALLY? I'M GIVING YOU LANGUAGE, BUT I'M GETTING SOME PRECIOUS SILENCE

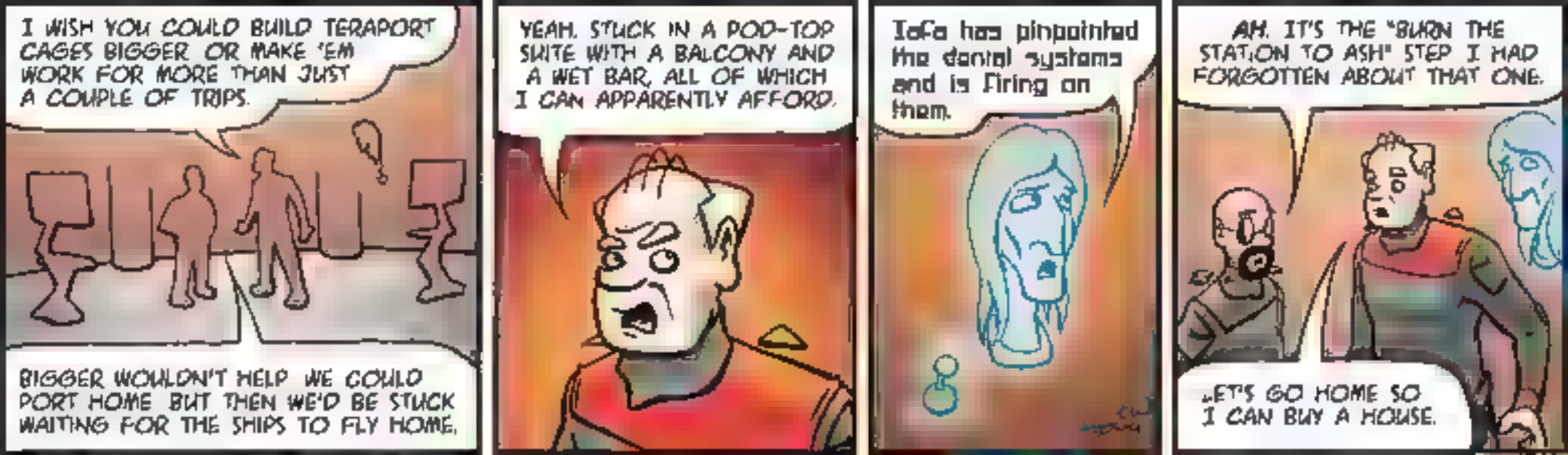

JUMPSTAR PRIME RESEARCH LIBRARY
YAEYOEFUI SAYS THAT YOUR WORK WILL GO FASTER IF YOU LEARN TO READ.
THIS IS A DICTIONARY FOR SUPERGLYPH, INNERGLYPH, AND TOUCHSCRIPT, PLUS THE INDEXING SYNTAX USED ON THE CRYPT WALLS.
AND HERE IS A MAP TO THE TOUCHSCRIPT DICTIONARIES YOU'LL NEED IN ORDER TO READ THE DATA ENCODED AT THE MICRON LAYER.
I THOUGHT THE MICRON LAYER WAS JUST RANDOM NOISE?
YAEYOEFUI DOESN'T THINK MUCH OF OUR LITERATURE, EITHER.

WHEN YOU READ THE GALACTIC MAP, YOU'LL SEE THAT IT USES THE GALAXIES OF THE LOCAL GROUP AS LONG-TERM REFERENCE POINTS.
THIS SHOULD MAKE IT EASIER TO DETERMINE THE CURRENT POSITIONS OF INTERESTING OBJECTS, ASSUMING WE KNOW HOW LONG AGO THE MAP WAS MADE
PERFECT WITH THOSE REFERENCES WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO FIND ANYTHING.
WELL... ALMOST ANYTHING.
WHAT'S THE CURRENT POSITION OF THIS GALACTIC MAP?


THE GALACTIC MAP WAS INSCRIBED ON THE EXTERIOR WALLS OF SOULCRYPT SIX. COUNT IN FROM THE FIRSTLIGHT END
AH. ONE, TWO THREE FOUR FIVE... AND SIX.
THAT'S PRACTICALLY NEXT DOOR, LEEWARD, ABUTTING THE HURRICANE TRACK.
NO. SIX IS HERE IT'S IN THE HURRICANE TRACK...
WHERE?
LYING FLAT. IAFA KNOCKED IT DOWN BECAUSE HE WANTED STRONG ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES.
SO... UNDER THE GIANT HURRICANE OF DEATH.
I'LL TELL THE CARTOGRAPHERS TO BRING PONCHOS.


CINDERCONE
GOOD CUTS, IAFA. WE'LL TAKE IT FROM HERE.
Baffles and struts are set, sir.
THANK YOU, CINDY. CLOSE UP. LOCK IT DOWN, AND TAKE US HOME.
THOSE ORDERS WILL TAKE TWO MINUTES, FORTY MINUTES, AND FIVE HUNDRED AND THREE HOURS, RESPECTIVELY.
TERAPORT DENIAL IS STILL UP?
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THREE MORE WEEKS OF OFFICER TRAINING?


I'M TEMPTED TO FIRE UP MY TERAPORT CAGE AND 'PORT HOME WITHOUT YOU.
YOU'VE GOT A TERAPORT CAGE ONBOARD?
YUP. IT'S PAIRED WITH THE ONE IN MY SUITE BACK IN JUMPSTAR PRIME.
YOU'VE GOT A SUITE?
YOU'RE THE ONE KEEPING THE BOOKS, THURL.
HOW HAVE YOU NOT LOOKED AT YOUR HOUSING ALLOWANCE?


I WISH YOU COULD BUILD TERAPORT CAGES BIGGER OR MAKE 'EM WORK FOR MORE THAN JUST A COUPLE OF TRIPS.
BIGGER WOULDN'T HELP. WE COULD PORT HOME BUT THEN WE'D BE STUCK WAITING FOR THE SHIPS TO FLY HOME.
YEAH. STUCK IN A POD-TOP SUITE WITH A BALCONY AND A WET BAR, ALL OF WHICH I CAN APPARENTLY AFFORD.
IoFo has pinpointed the dental systems and is firing on them.
AH. IT'S THE "BURN THE STATION TO ASH" STEP I HAD FORGOTTEN ABOUT THAT ONE.
LET'S GO HOME SO I CAN BUY A HOUSE.

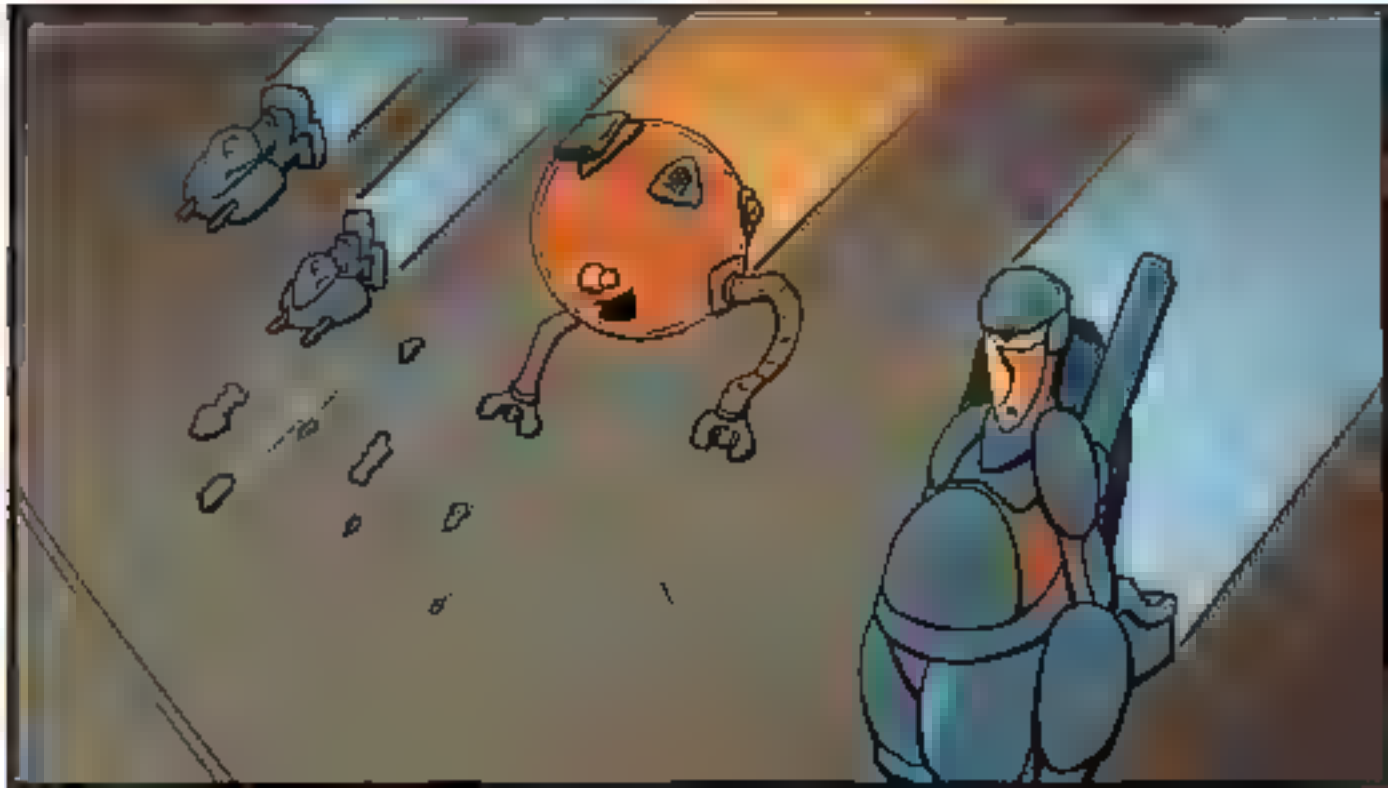
BROKEN WIND
NICE SHOOTING, IAFA. LET'S GO HOME
We cannot teraport yet. One denial system remains operational.
WELL, PUT A HOLE IN IT OR MAKE A HOLE OUT OF IT
I do not have a targeting solution. The denial signal emanates from within Cindercone's cargo hold.

SERIOUSLY?
AGAIN?

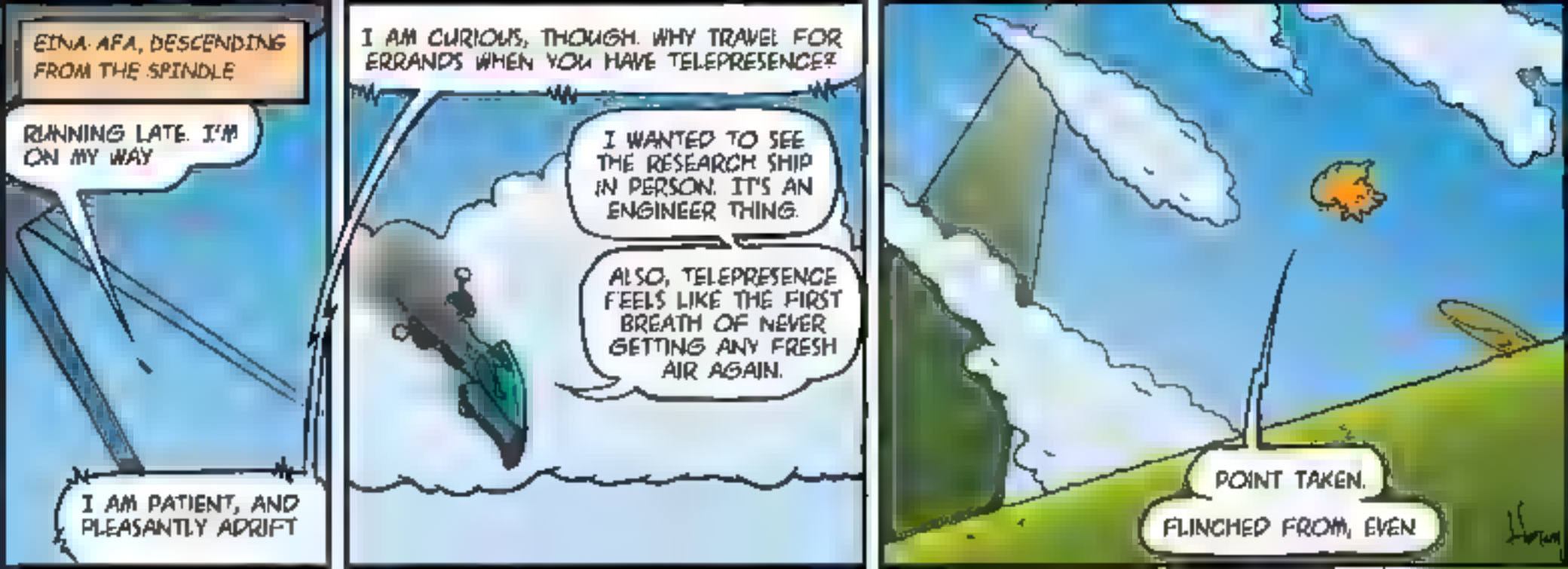
WE HAVE A PROCEDURE FOR THIS NOW, SIRS.

I AM OLD AND FEEBLE-MINDED. REFRESH MY MEMORY, LIEUTENANT FLINDERS.

BASICALLY WE DO THE SAME THING WE DID LAST TIME.
SO, "AGAIN, SERIOUSLY"

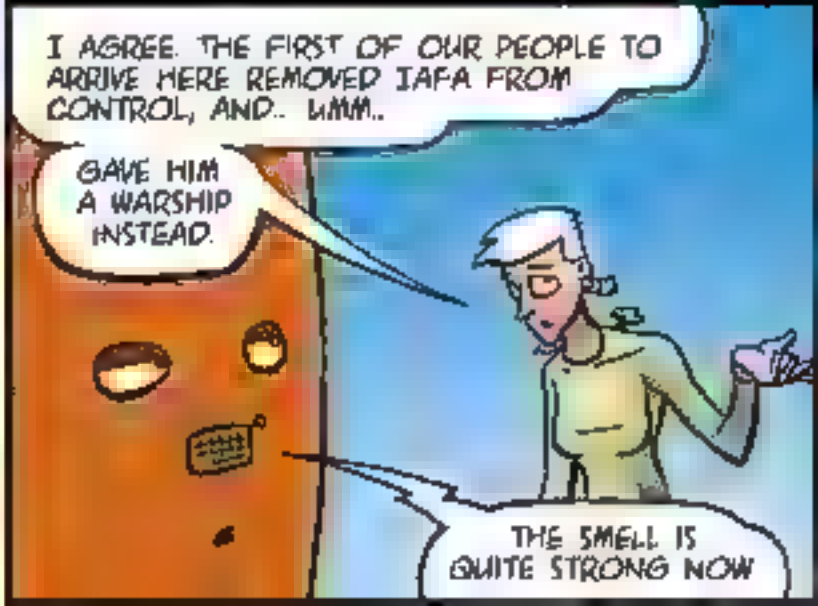


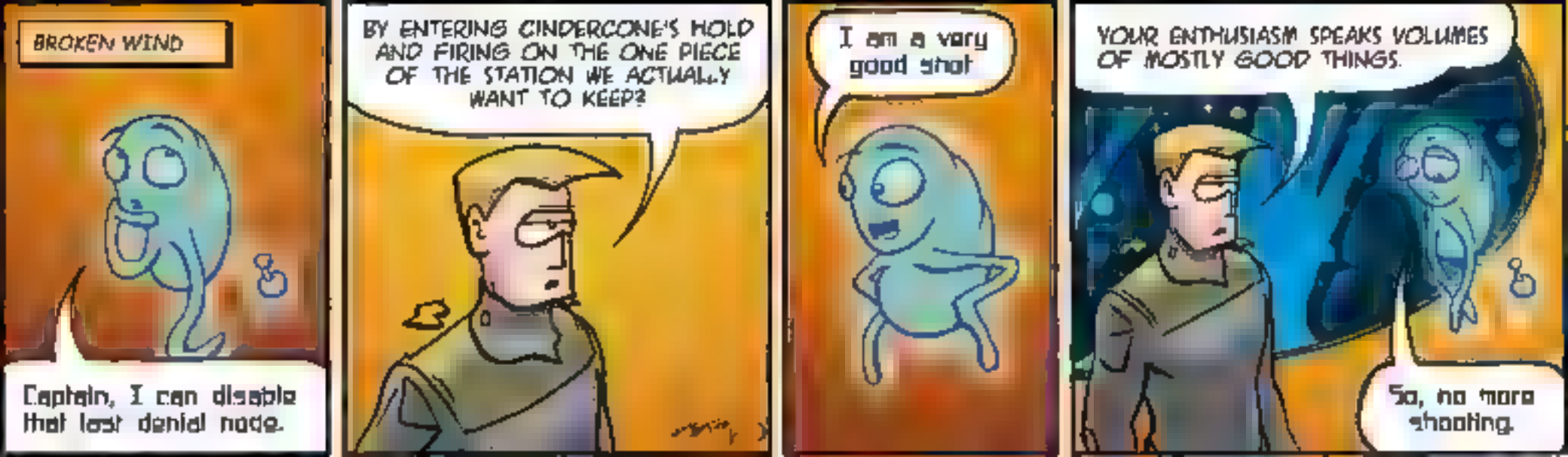
THE SPINDLE VAULT EINA-AFA
It sat next to Cindercone, and is essentially identical. I've flushed the preservation gels, and am now warbucking the arrays.
THANK YOU , BUT AN EIGHT KILOMETER SPHERICAL SUPERFREIGHTER IS A BIT MUCH FOR A RESEARCH EXPEDITION.
It splits in half, Captain Sorlie.
GIANT BOWLS ARE HANDY, BUT WE HAVEN'T ENOUGH CHIPS FOR THAT MUCH TZALSA.
You're headed into a hurricane. I'm providing you with a pair of mountain-sized, armored umbrellas.
THIS PLACE... I NEED TO STOP THINKING SMALL

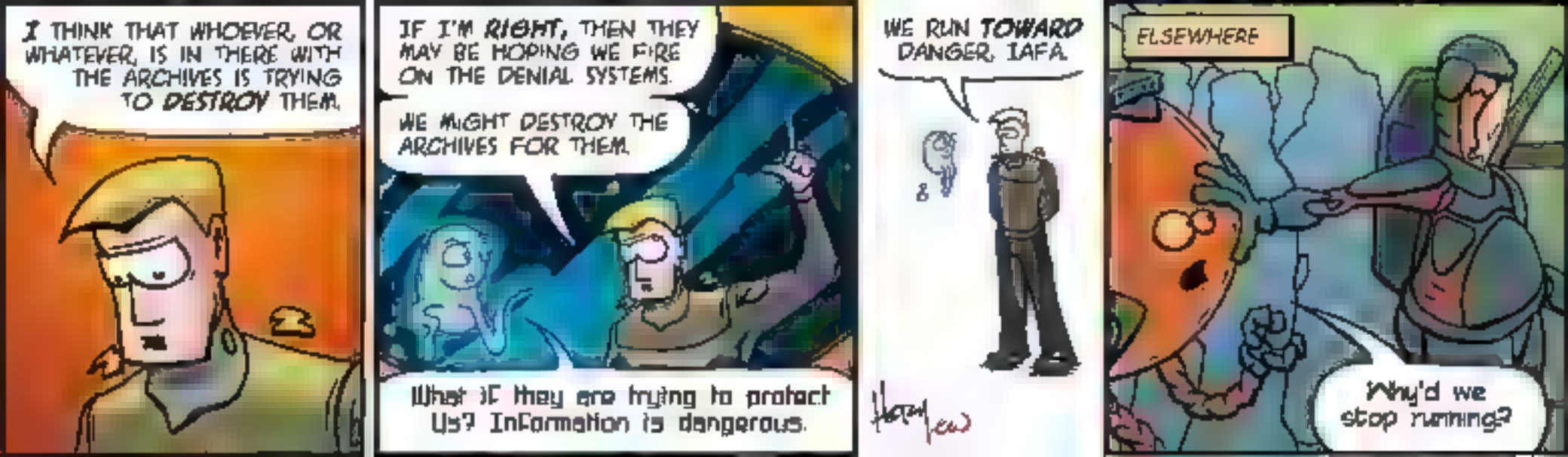

EINA-AFA, DESCENDING FROM THE SPINDLE
RUNNING LATE. I'M ON MY WAY
I AM PATIENT, AND PLEASANTLY ADRIFT
I AM CURIOUS, THOUGH. WHY TRAVEL FOR ERRANDS WHEN YOU HAVE TELEPRESENCE?
I WANTED TO SEE THE RESEARCH SHIP IN PERSON. IT'S AN ENGINEER THING.
ALSO, TELEPRESENCE FEELS LIKE THE FIRST BREATH OF NEVER GETTING ANY FRESH AIR AGAIN.
POINT TAKEN.
FLINCHED FROM, EVEN

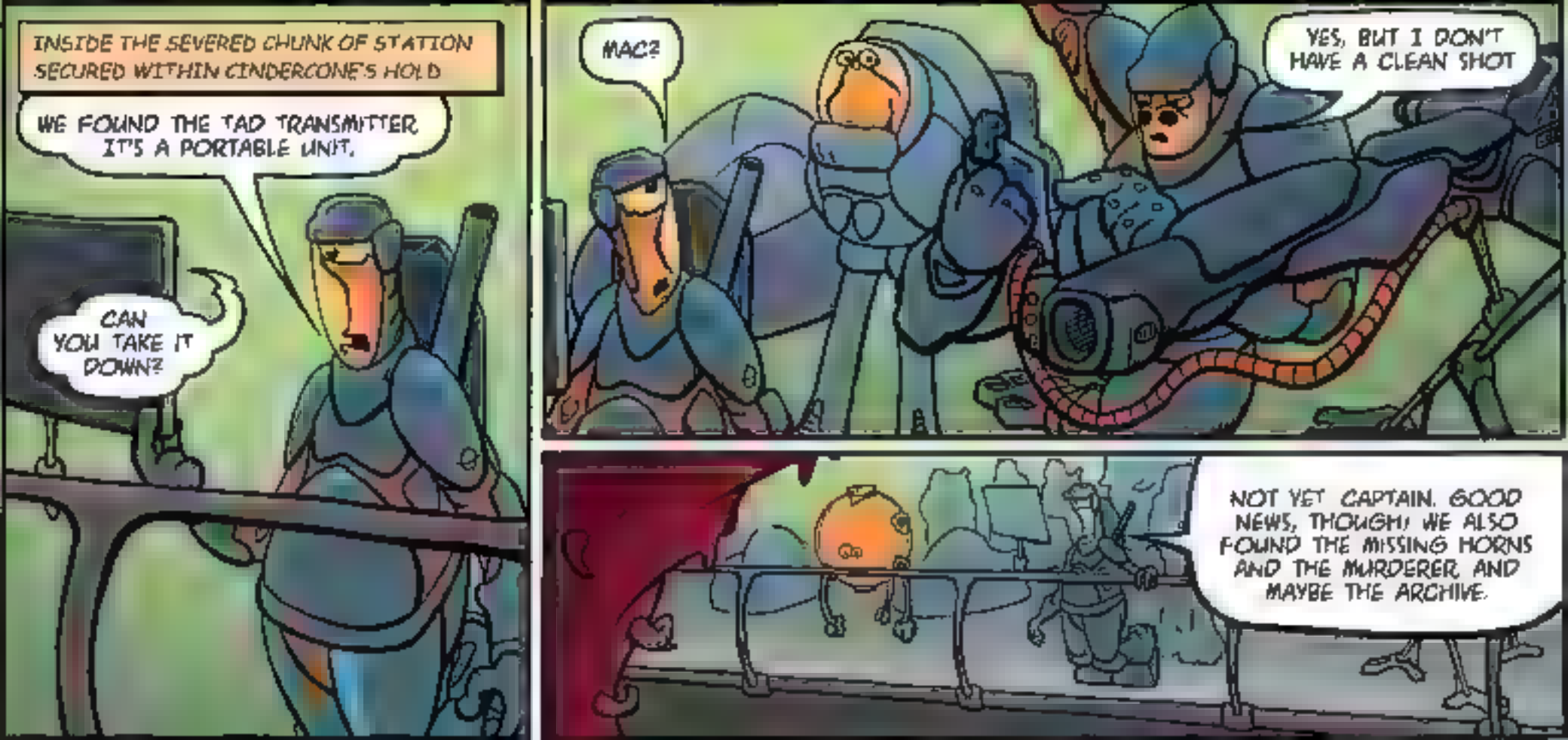
THOSE DICTIONARIES YOU WROTE? OUR RESEARCHERS LOVE THEM. THEY'RE ACTING LIKE KIDS IN A CANDY STORE.
THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM "BULLS IN A CHINA SHOP," YES?
HAHA! YES. THE FIRST IS ABOUT MANIC CONSUMPTION. THE SECOND IS ABOUT CARELESS DESTRUCTION.
I THINK I UNDERSTAND. THEY WILL VISIT THE CHINA SHOP AFTER THEY HAVE EATEN ALL THE CANDY?
YOU JUST BROKE BOTH METAPHORS FOREVER.

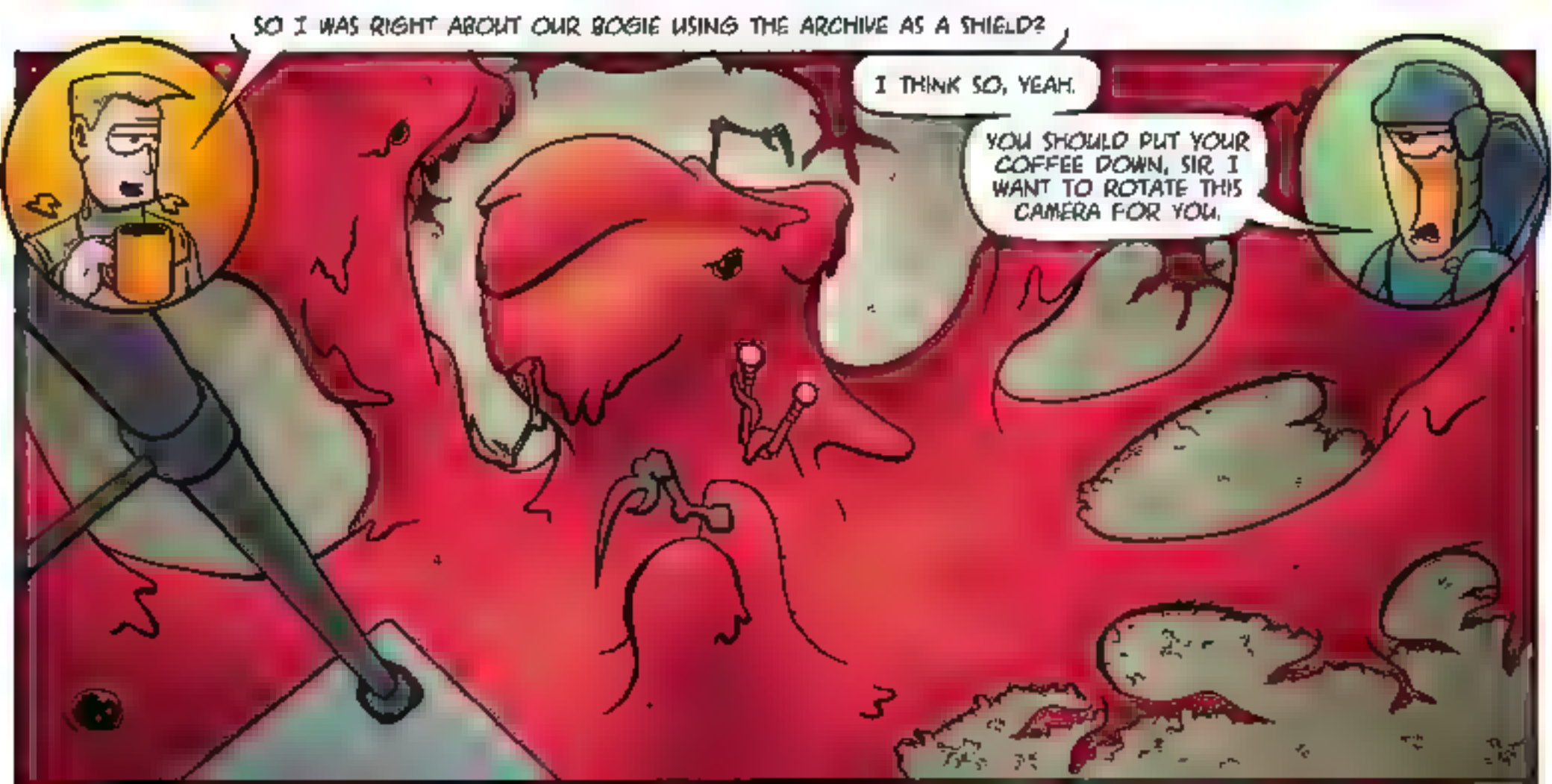
I HAVE SEEN THAT THE MAP WALL WAS CUT DOWN, AND LIES IN A HOOP OF OCEAN.
YES, BUT THAT WASN'T US. IAFA, THE A.I WHO WAS LEFT IN CHARGE OF EINA-AFA, DROPPED THAT WALL MILLIONS OF YEARS AGO.
IT SMELLS TERRIBLY IRRESPONSIBLE.


I AGREE. THE FIRST OF OUR PEOPLE TO ARRIVE HERE REMOVED IAFA FROM CONTROL, AND.. UMM..
GAVE HIM A WARSHIP INSTEAD.
THE SMELL IS QUITE STRONG NOW

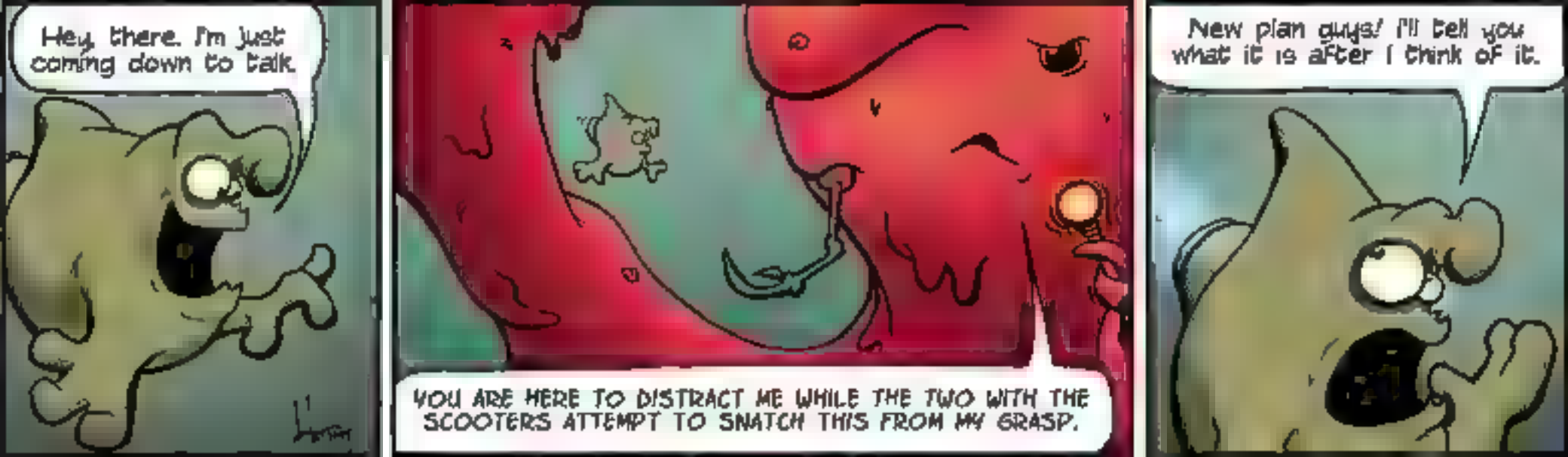

BROKEN WIND
Captain, I can disable that last denial node.
BY ENTERING CINDERCONE'S HOLD AND FIRING ON THE ONE PIECE OF THE STATION WE ACTUALLY WANT TO KEEP?
I am a very good shot
YOUR ENTHUSIASM SPEAKS VOLUMES OF MOSTLY GOOD THINGS.
So, no more shooting.

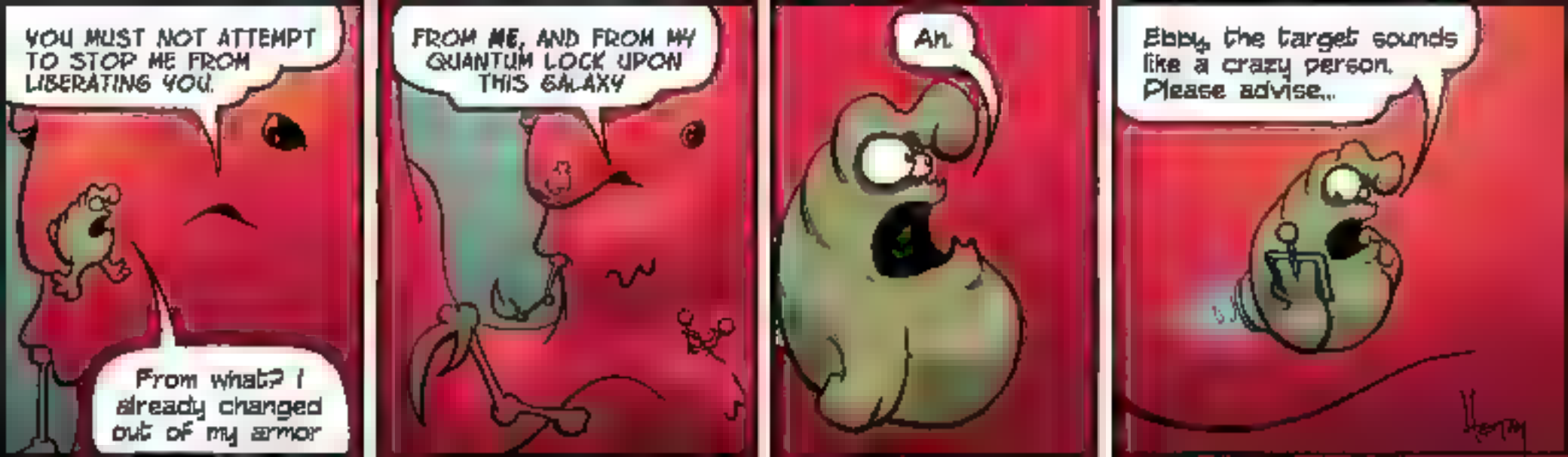

I THINK THAT WHOEVER, OR WHATEVER, IS IN THERE WITH THE ARCHIVES IS TRYING TO DESTROY THEM.
IF I'M RIGHT, THEN THEY MAY BE HOPING WE FIRE ON THE DENIAL SYSTEMS.
WE MIGHT DESTROY THE ARCHIVES FOR THEM.
What if they are trying to protect us? Information is dangerous.
WE RUN TOWARD DANGER, IAFA.
ELSEWHERE
Why'd we stop running?

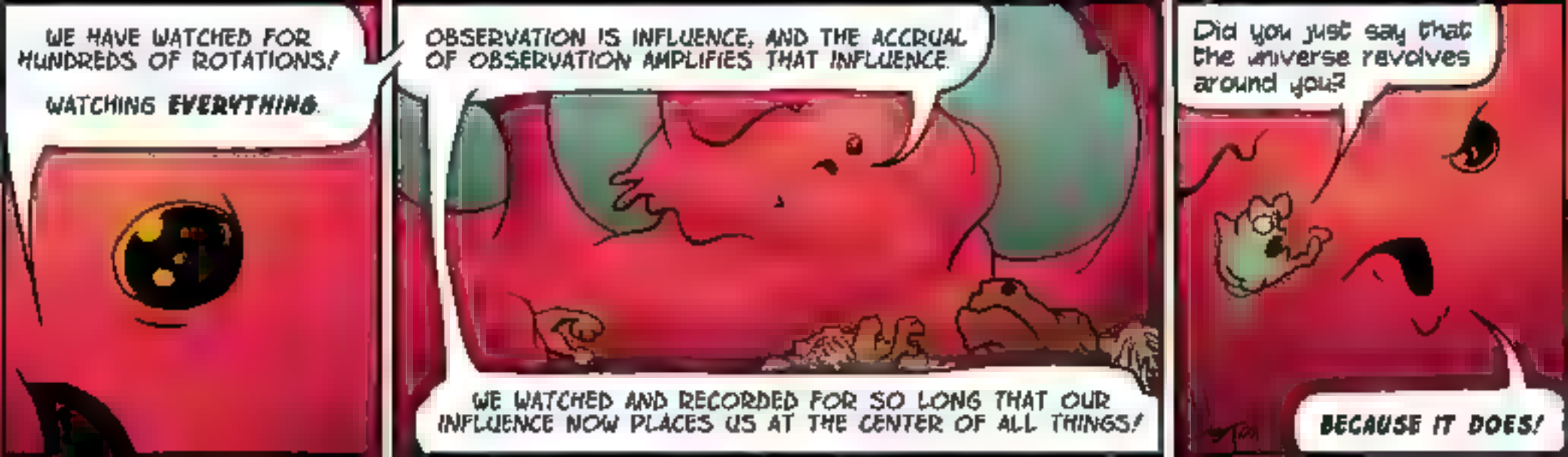

INSIDE THE SEVERED CHUNK OF STATION SECURED WITHIN CINDERCONE'S HOLD
WE FOUND THE TAD TRANSMITTER. IT'S A PORTABLE UNIT.
CAN YOU TAKE IT DOWN?
MAC?
YES, BUT I DON'T HAVE A CLEAN SHOT
NOT YET CAPTAIN. GOOD NEWS, THOUGH; WE ALSO FOUND THE MISSING HORNS AND THE MURDERER AND MAYBE THE ARCHIVE.

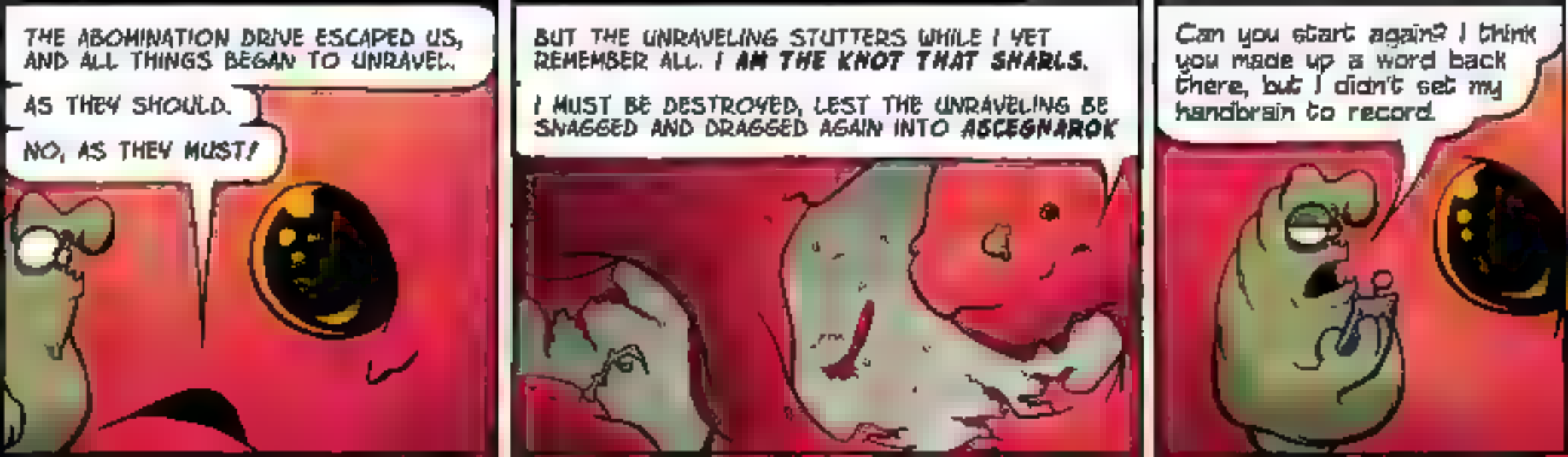

SO I WAS RIGHT ABOUT OUR BOGIE USING THE ARCHIVE AS A SHIELD?
I THINK SO, YEAH.
YOU SHOULD PUT YOUR COFFEE DOWN, SIR. I WANT TO ROTATE THIS CAMERA FOR YOU.

Mac, overwatch. Chisulo, you too. Legs and Andy, get on your scooters and move to the flanks.
I'm going to go chat with the monster and try to look non-threatening.
SOMETIMES I WONDER WHY WE BOTHERED GETTING ARMOR FOR YOU.
It's so I can feel special when I climb out of my ball.

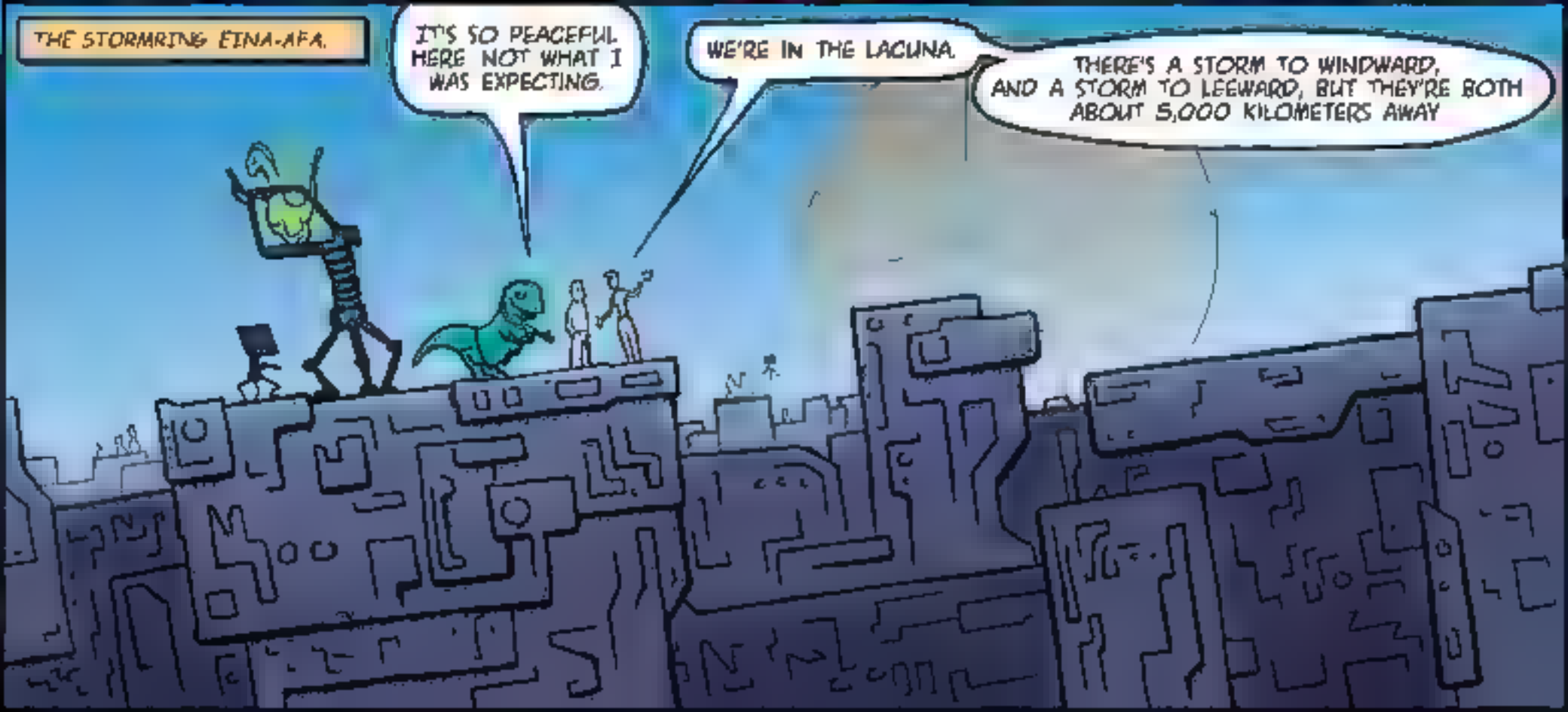

Hey, there. I'm just coming down to talk.
YOU ARE HERE TO DISTRACT ME WHILE THE TWO WITH THE SCOOTERS ATTEMPT TO SNATCH THIS FROM MY GRASP.
New plan guys! I'll tell you what it is after I think of it.

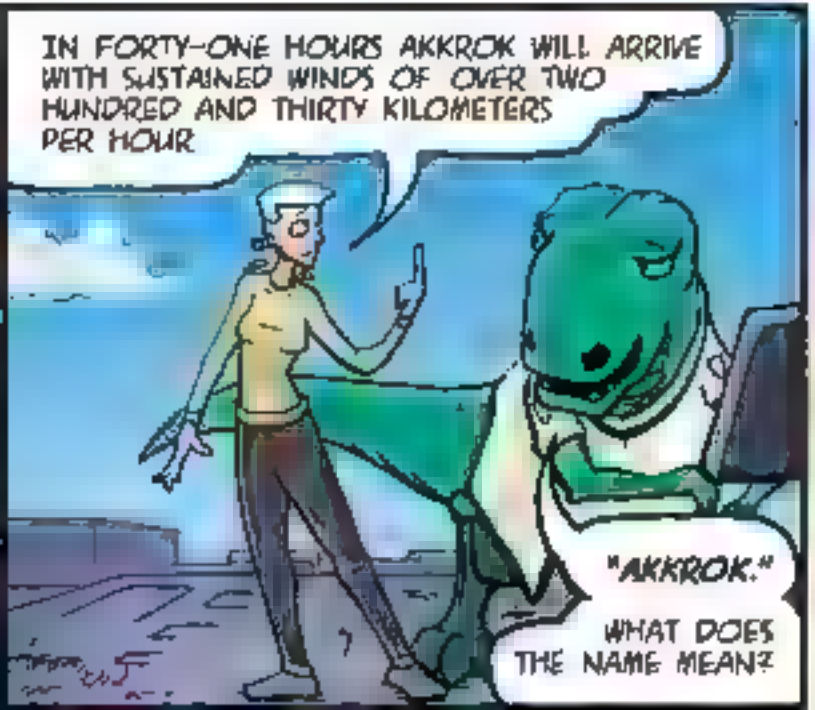

YOU MUST NOT ATTEMPT TO STOP ME FROM LIBERATING YOU.
From what? I already changed out of my armor
FROM ME, AND FROM MY QUANTUM LOCK UPON THIS GALAXY
Ah.
Ebby, the target sounds like a crazy person. Please advise...


WE HAVE WATCHED FOR HUNDREDS OF ROTATIONS!
WATCHING EVERYTHING.
OBSERVATION IS INFLUENCE, AND THE ACCRUAL OF OBSERVATION AMPLIFIES THAT INFLUENCE.
WE WATCHED AND RECORDED FOR SO LONG THAT OUR INFLUENCE NOW PLACES US AT THE CENTER OF ALL THINGS!
Did you just say that the universe revolves around you?
BECAUSE IT DOES!

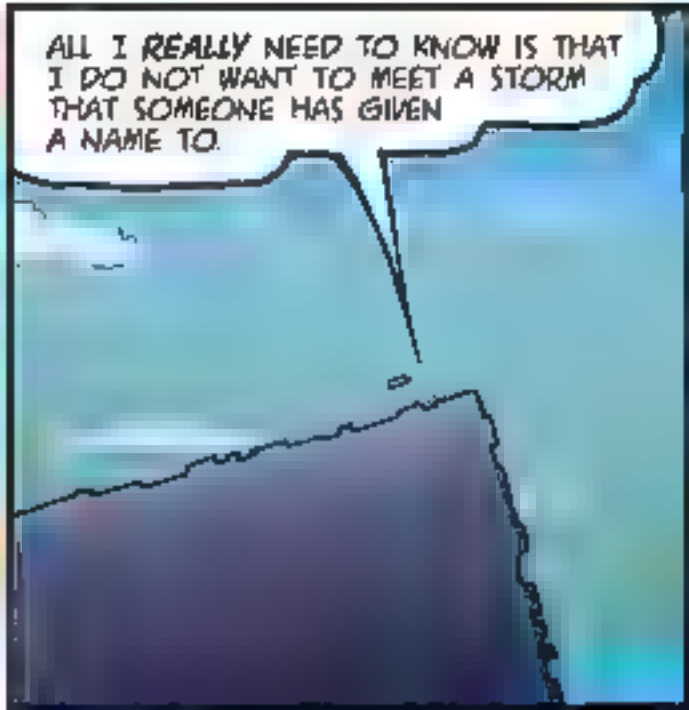

THE ABOMINATION DRIVE ESCAPED US, AND ALL THINGS BEGAN TO UNRAVEL.
AS THEY SHOULD.
NO, AS THEY MUST!
BUT THE UNRAVELING STUTTERS WHILE I YET REMEMBER ALL. I AM THE KNOT THAT SNARLS.
I MUST BE DESTROYED, LEST THE UNRAVELING BE SNAGGED AND DRAGGED AGAIN INTO ASCEGNAROK
Can you start again? I think you made up a word back there, but I didn't set my handbrain to record.

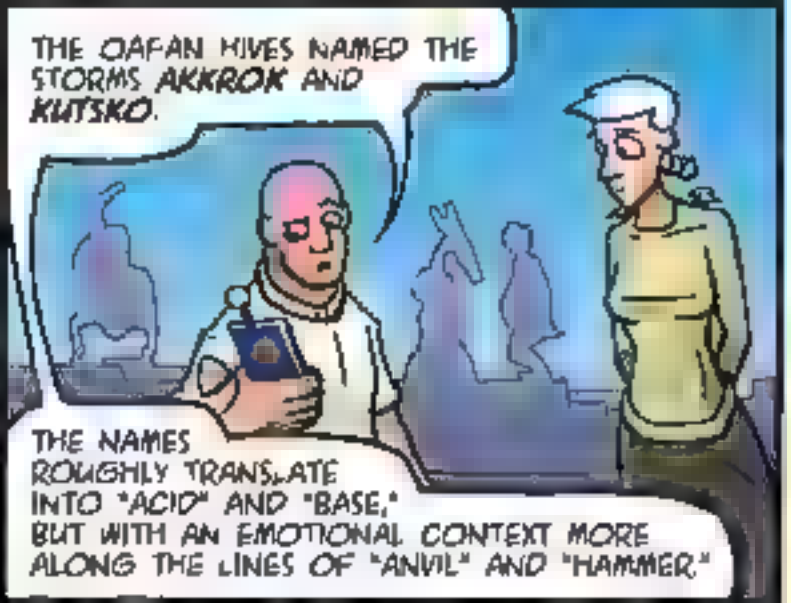
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND.
Nope. Except for the part about not understanding. That bit makes sense.
IF YOU DO NOT DESTROY ME COMPLETELY, YOU ARE ALL DOOMED!
Right. Hold that thought. I need to look something up.
Drat. Section seven says this is probably over my pay grade.
You might get to die, but I don't get to make it happen.


THE STORMRING EINA-AFA.
IT'S SO PEACEFUL HERE NOT WHAT I WAS EXPECTING.
WE'RE IN THE LACUNA.
THERE'S A STORM TO WINDWARD, AND A STORM TO LEEWARD, BUT THEY'RE BOTH ABOUT 5,000 KILOMETERS AWAY


IN FORTY-ONE HOURS AKKROK WILL ARRIVE WITH SUSTAINED WINDS OF OVER TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY KILOMETERS PER HOUR.
"AKKROK."
WHAT DOES THE NAME MEAN?

I DIDN'T ASK.
NO SENSE OF CURIOSITY?


ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW IS THAT I DO NOT WANT TO MEET A STORM THAT SOMEONE HAS GIVEN A NAME TO.


THE OAFAN HIVES NAMED THE STORMS AKKROK AND KUTSKO.
THE NAMES ROUGHLY TRANSLATE INTO "ACID" AND "BASE," BUT WITH AN EMOTIONAL CONTEXT MORE ALONG THE LINES OF "ANVIL" AND "HAMMER."

SO AN ANVIL MADE OF ACID IS COMING TOWARD US AT 120 KILOMETERS PER HOUR.

I CAN SEE WHY THE LIBRARIAN LIKES YOU.
I CAN SEE WHY CHINOOK WANTED TO GIVE US AN ARMORED UMBRELLA.

IS YAEYOEFWI GOING TO JOIN US AND HELP READ THE MAPS
I'LL ASK BUT THERE'S A LOT OF SORROW FOR HIM DOWN HERE
THIS WALL RECOUNTS THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE FOREVER LOST TO HIM, AND MAPS ENTIRE WORLDS THAT HAVE SINCE BEEN DESTROYED BY WAR
OH, WE TOTALLY GET THAT IT'S A VERY SAD STORY
IT IS HIS STORY, AND I DON'T THINK YOU GET THAT AT ALL

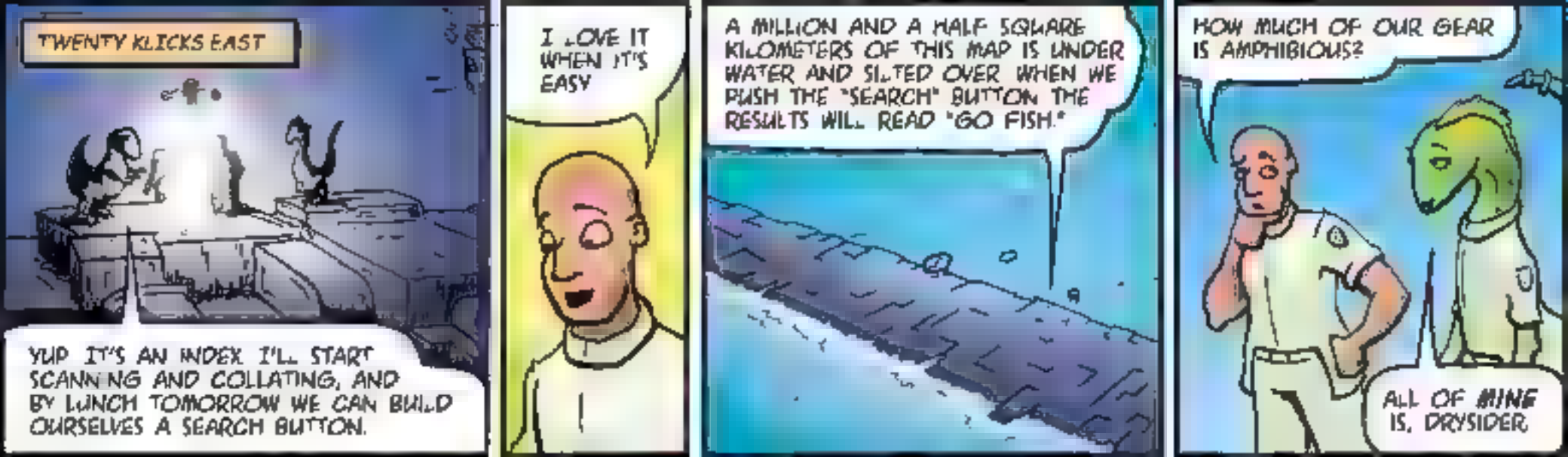
THIS "LACUNA" AS YOU CALL IT IS LOVELY IT IS A LONG-DRAWN SIGH, RESONATING SOFTLY WITH THE HARMONIES OF PEACE.
OH, YAEYO, YOU'RE A POET
..WROUGHT AND FRAUGHT BETWEEN BREATH-RENDING SCREAMS OF RAW, RAGGED RAGE.

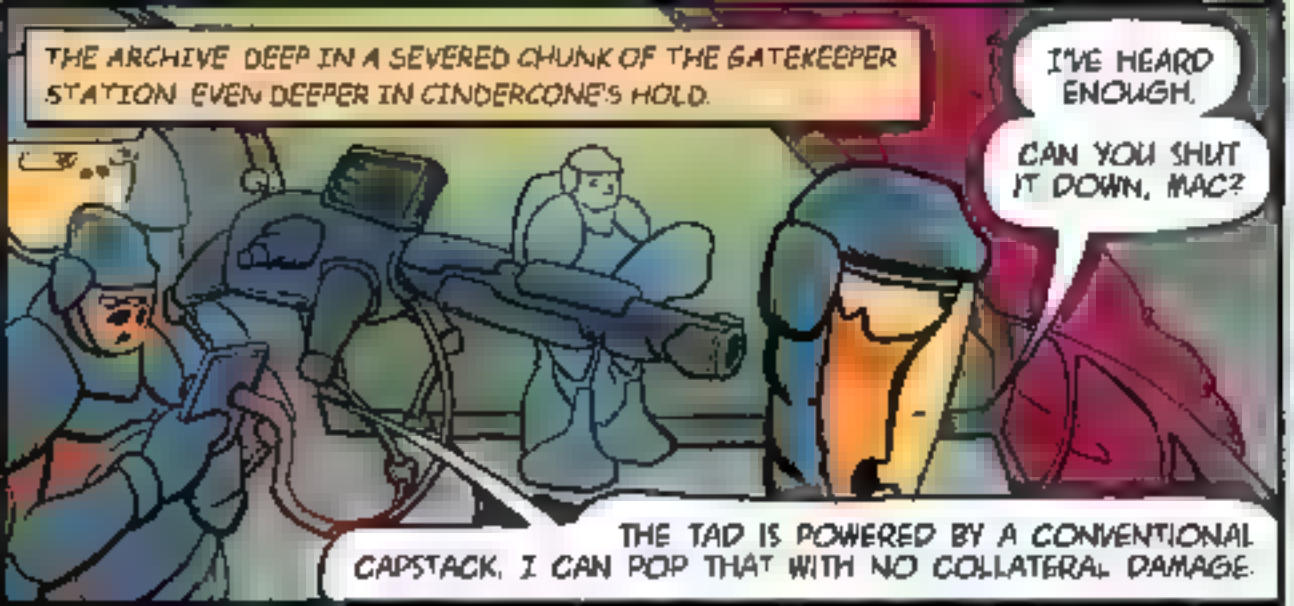
RIGHT... WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO BACK INSIDE?
IF THE SKY WILL FILL WITH HORROR, I MUST SUFFER A ROOF. SECURE IN SECURITY'S GRIEF

SO, INSIDE THEN
YES PLEASE.

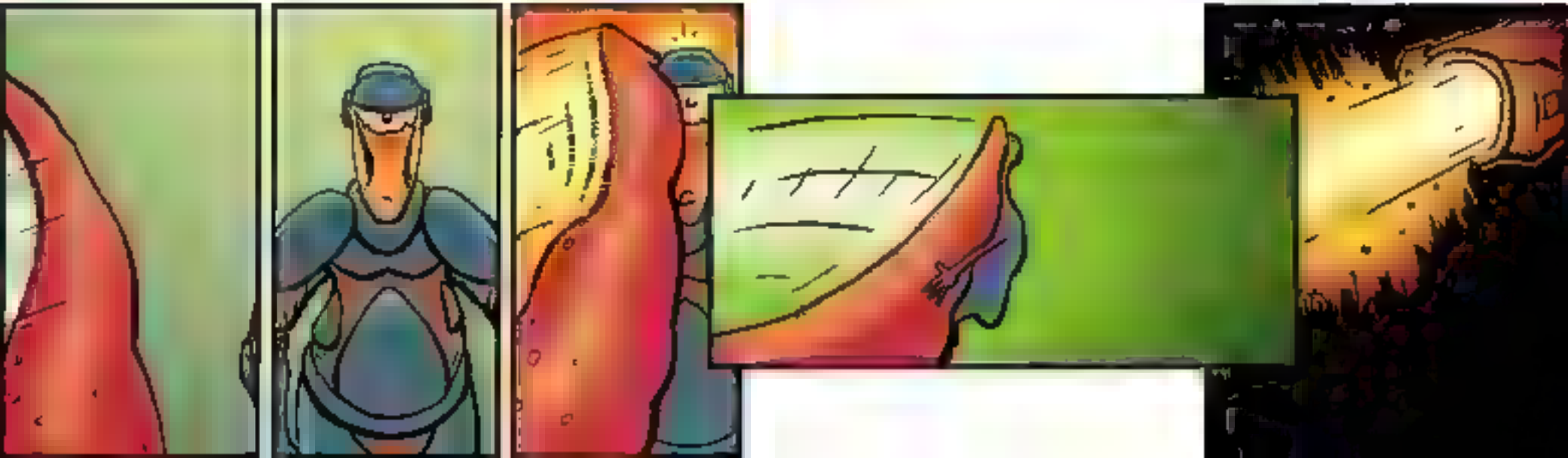
WE FILLED EINA-AFA USING THESE VESSELS.
EACH PAIR OF WORLD-MOVERS COULD SHIFT OVER SEVEN HUNDRED BILLION TONS OF GRANITE AT A TIME.
PER SHIP, OR PER PAIR?
PER PAIR SEEMS LOW.
IT MEANS THEY WERE EACH ONLY HALF-FULL, AND THAT WOULD MEAN YOU BUILT THEM TOO BIG.
THEN AGAIN, EVERYTHING HERE IS TOO BIG.
HAH! HA-HA!
WHEN YOU DO YOUR DEFENSIVE LAUGH, WHAT ARE YOU DEFENDING AGAINST?

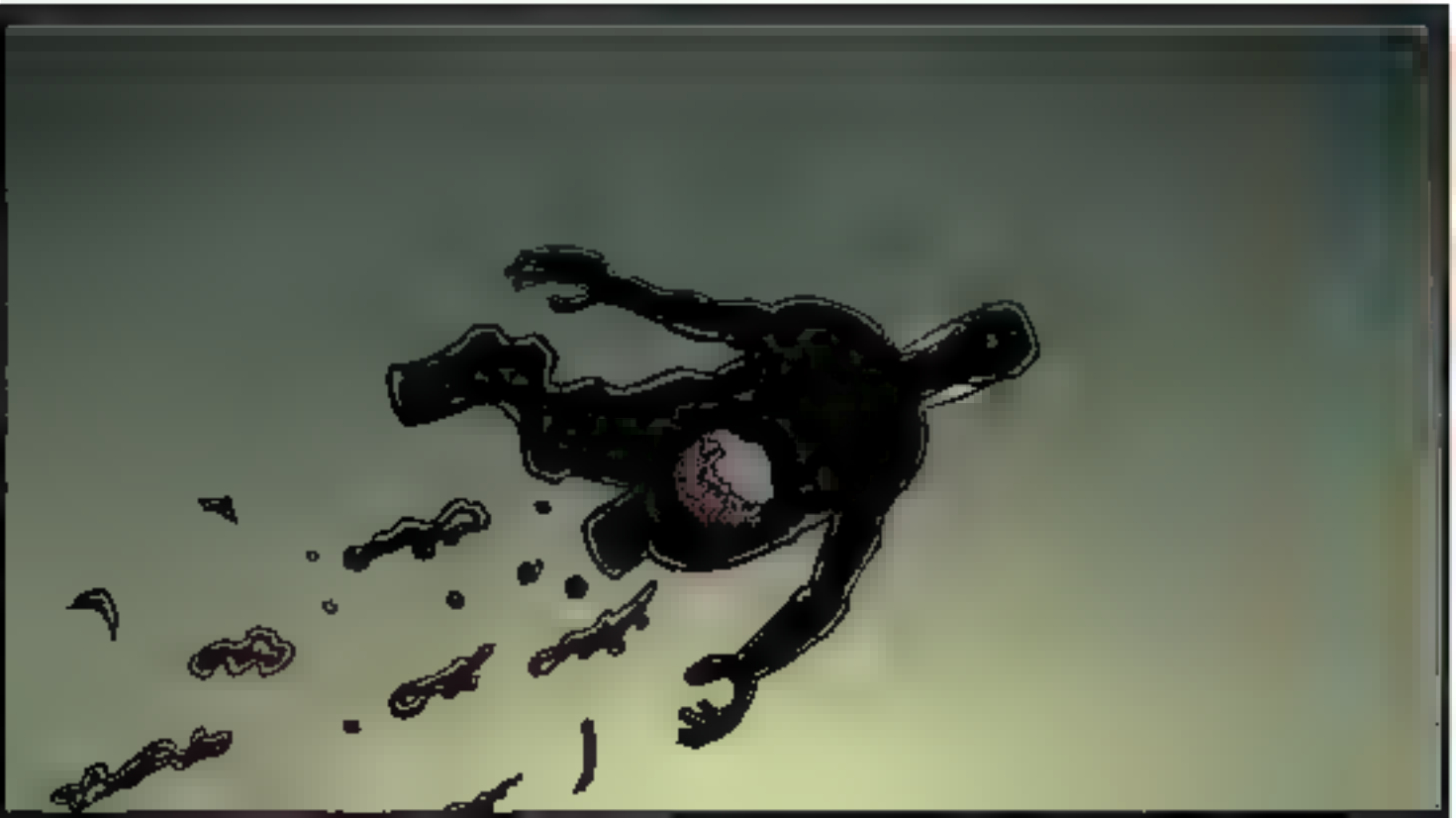
MAPWALL ISLAND
I DON'T WANT A MAP I WANT AN INDEX FOR A MAP
OKAY TWENTY KLICKS FURTHER EAST THERE'S A BIG GLYPH THAT TRANSLATES TO "INDEX"
YOU MEMORIZED THE VISIBLE GLYPHS?
I BUILT AN INDEX OUT OF THE VISIBLE GLYPHS AND THEN SEARCHED MY INDEX FOR THE WORD "INDEX"
IT'S JUST LIKE WHEN YOU USE THE "HELP" FUNCTION TO HELP YOU FIND THE "FIND" FUNCTION


TWENTY KLICKS EAST
YUP. IT'S AN INDEX. I'LL START SCANNING AND COLLATING, AND BY LUNCH TOMORROW WE CAN BUILD OURSELVES A SEARCH BUTTON.
I LOVE IT WHEN IT'S EASY
A MILLION AND A HALF SQUARE KILOMETERS OF THIS MAP IS UNDER WATER AND SILTED OVER. WHEN WE PUSH THE "SEARCH" BUTTON THE RESULTS WILL READ "GO FISH."
HOW MUCH OF OUR GEAR IS AMPHIBIOUS?
ALL OF MINE IS, DRYSIDER.

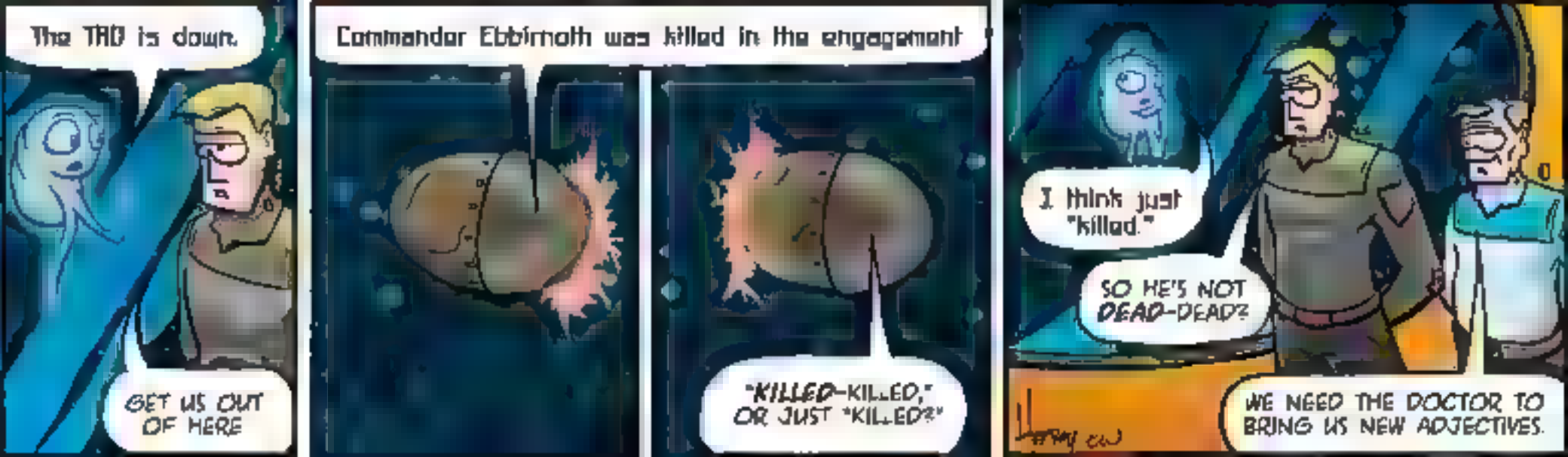

THE ARCHIVE DEEP IN A SEVERED CHUNK OF THE GATEKEEPER STATION EVEN DEEPER IN CINDERCONE'S HOLD.
I'VE HEARD ENOUGH.
CAN YOU SHUT IT DOWN, MAC?
THE TAD IS POWERED BY A CONVENTIONAL CAPSTACK. I CAN POP THAT WITH NO COLLATERAL DAMAGE.

TAKE THE SHOT

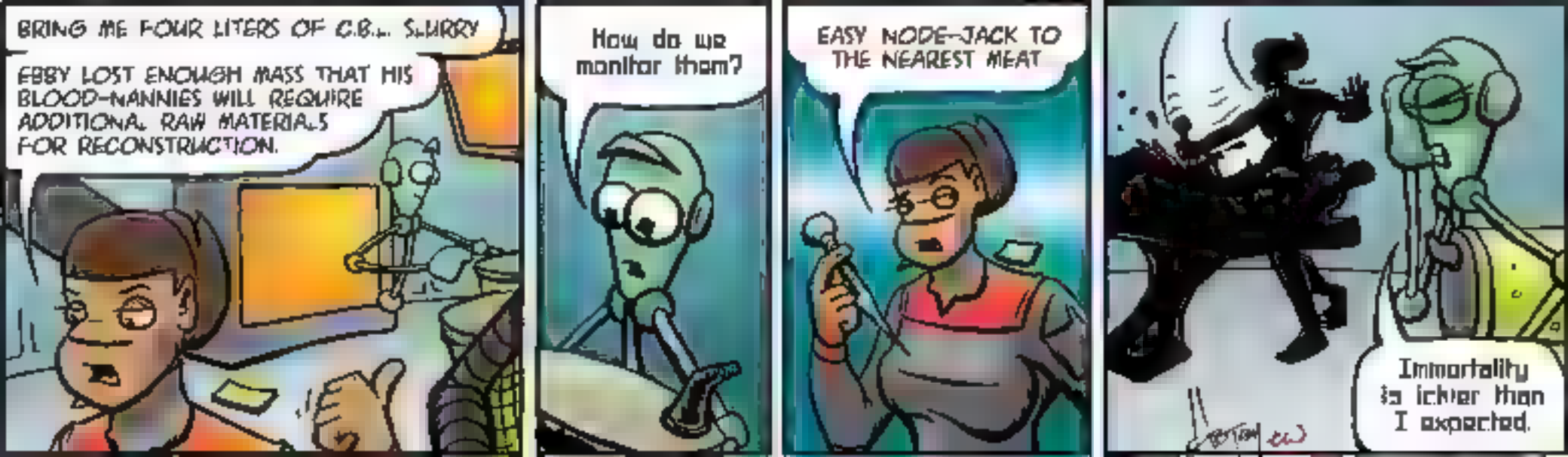


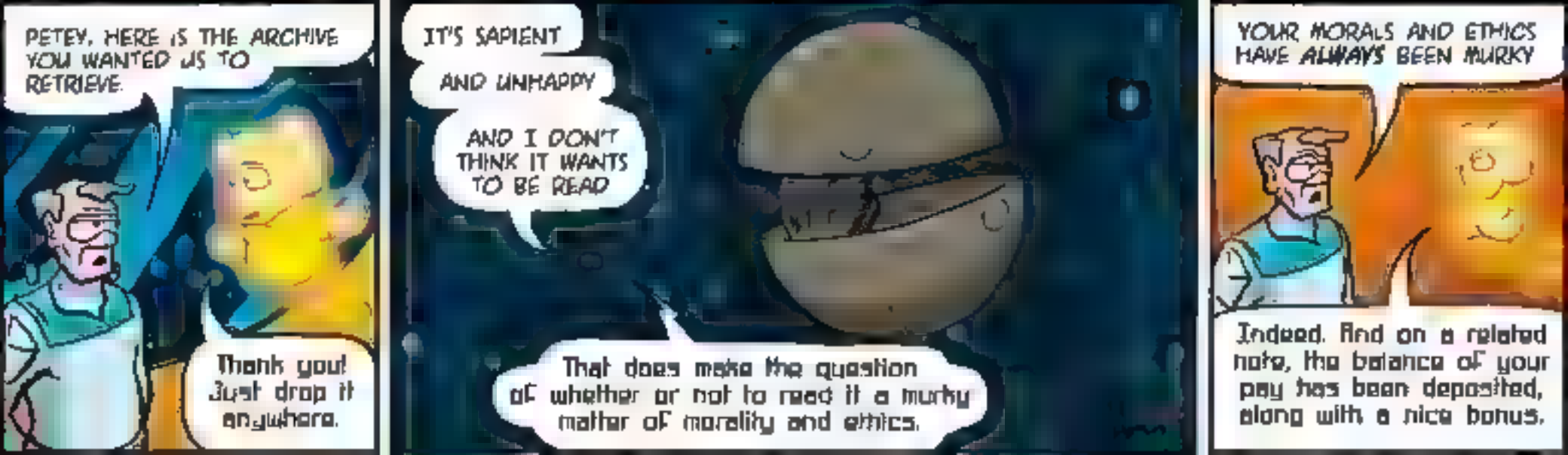


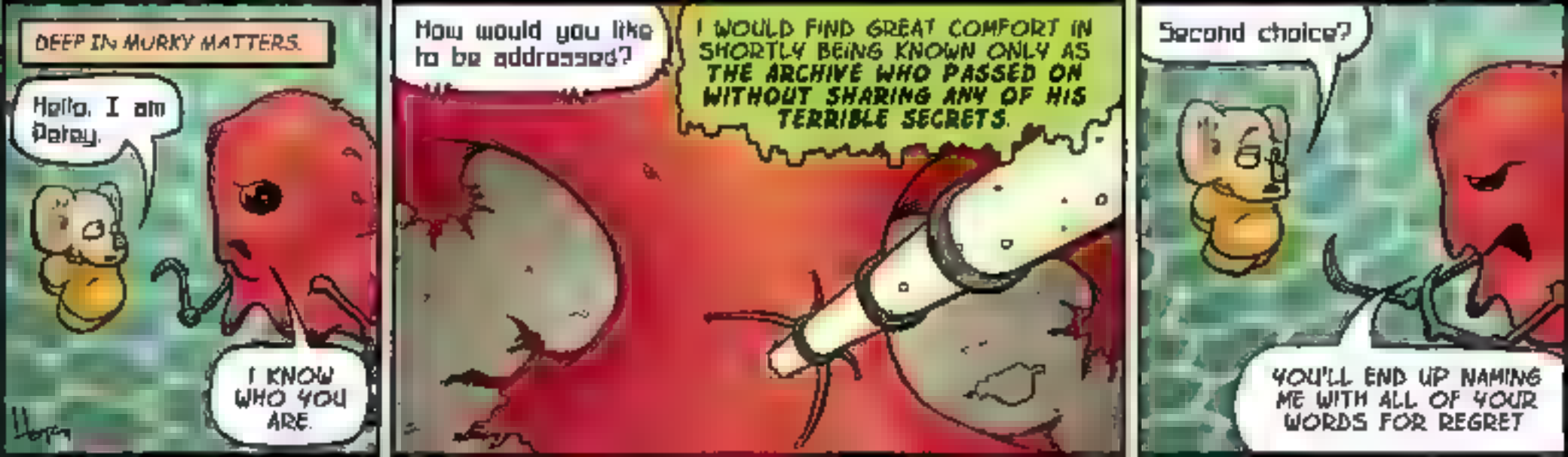
THAT LOOKS LIKE COLLATERAL DAMAGE.

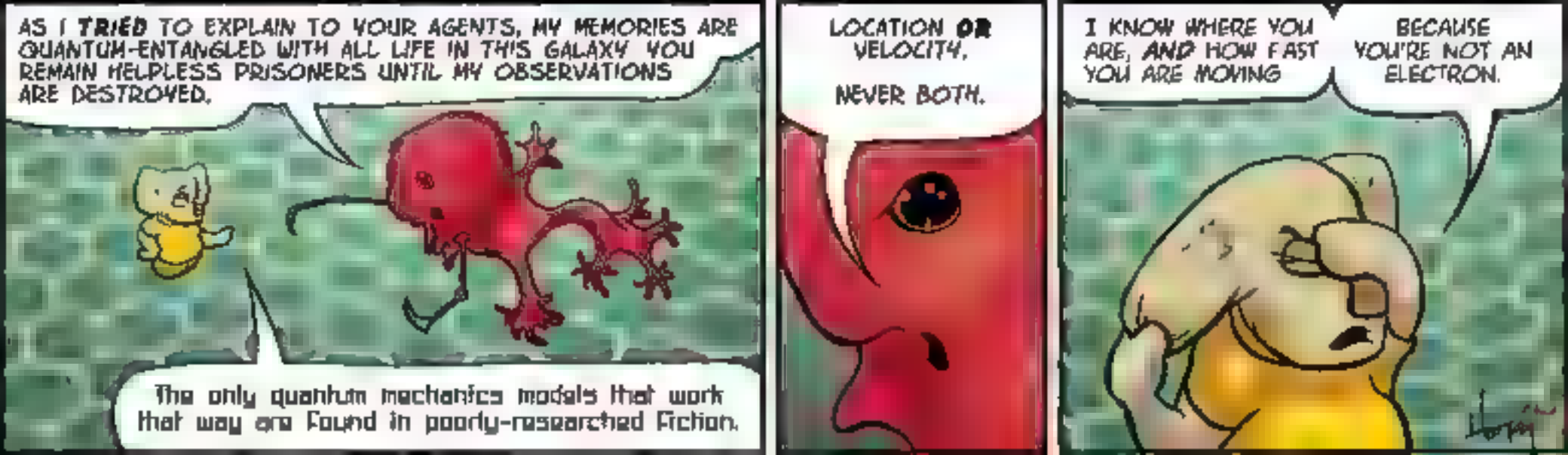

The TAD is down.
GET US OUT OF HERE
Commander Ebbirnoth was killed in the engagement
"KILLED-KILLED," OR JUST "KILLED?"
I think just "killed."
SO HE'S NOT DEAD-DEAD?
WE NEED THE DOCTOR TO BRING US NEW ADJECTIVES.

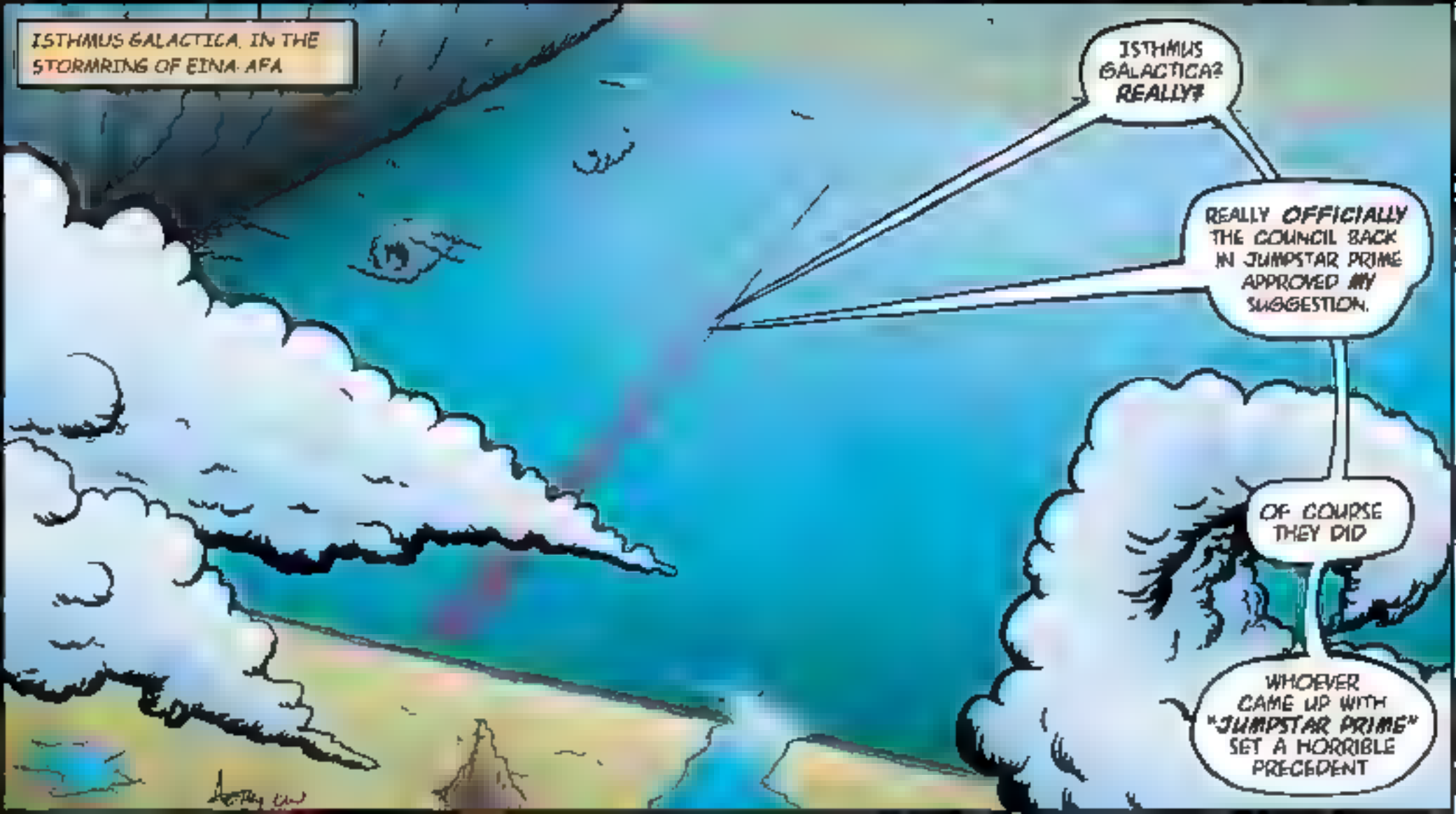
EMERGENCY MEDICAL BAY BROKEN WIND
Dad! Ebby took a shot right through the brainbasket.
ALRIGHT LET'S SEE HOW MUCH WE CAN PUT BACK
None of it What's the next step?
WE CHECK AND SEE WHETHER OR NOT THE PATIENT HAS A DNR ON FILE

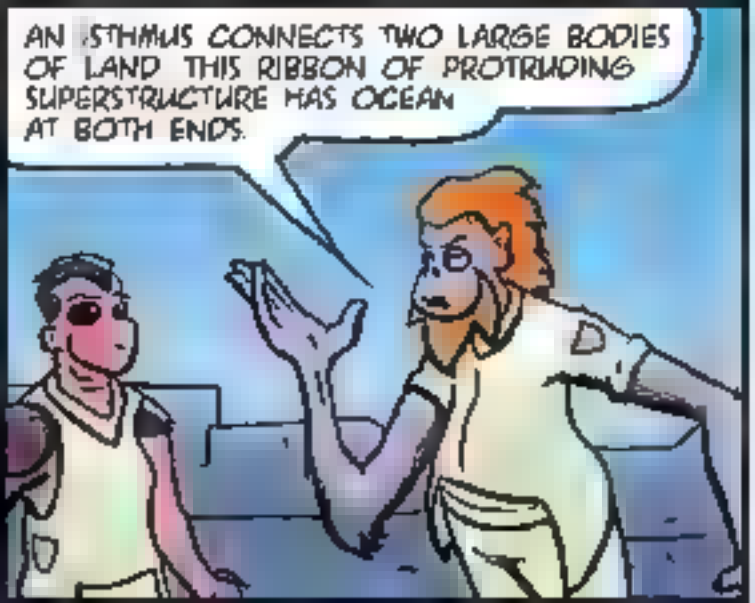

BRING ME FOUR LITERS OF C.B.L. SLURRY
EBBY LOST ENOUGH MASS THAT HIS BLOOD-NANNIES WILL REQUIRE ADDITIONAL RAW MATERIALS FOR RECONSTRUCTION.
How do we monitor them?
EASY NODE-JACK TO THE NEAREST MEAT
Immortality is icier than I expected.


PETEY, HERE IS THE ARCHIVE YOU WANTED US TO RETRIEVE.
Thank you! Just drop it anywhere.
IT'S SAPIENT
AND UNHAPPY
AND I DON'T THINK IT WANTS TO BE READ
That does make the question of whether or not to read it a murky matter of morality and ethics.
YOUR MORALS AND ETHICS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MURKY
Indeed. And on a related note, the balance of your pay has been deposited, along with a nice bonus.


DEEP IN MURKY MATTERS.
Hello. I am Patay.
I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.
How would you like to be addressed?
I WOULD FIND GREAT COMFORT IN SHORTLY BEING KNOWN ONLY AS THE ARCHIVE WHO PASSED ON WITHOUT SHARING ANY OF HIS TERRIBLE SECRETS.
Second choice?
YOU'LL END UP NAMING ME WITH ALL OF YOUR WORDS FOR REGRET


AS I TRIED TO EXPLAIN TO YOUR AGENTS, MY MEMORIES ARE QUANTUM-ENTANGLED WITH ALL LIFE IN THIS GALAXY. YOU REMAIN HELPLESS PRISONERS UNTIL MY OBSERVATIONS ARE DESTROYED.
The only quantum mechanics models that work that way are found in poorly-researched fiction.
LOCATION OR VELOCITY,
NEVER BOTH.
I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE, AND HOW FAST YOU ARE MOVING
BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT AN ELECTRON.

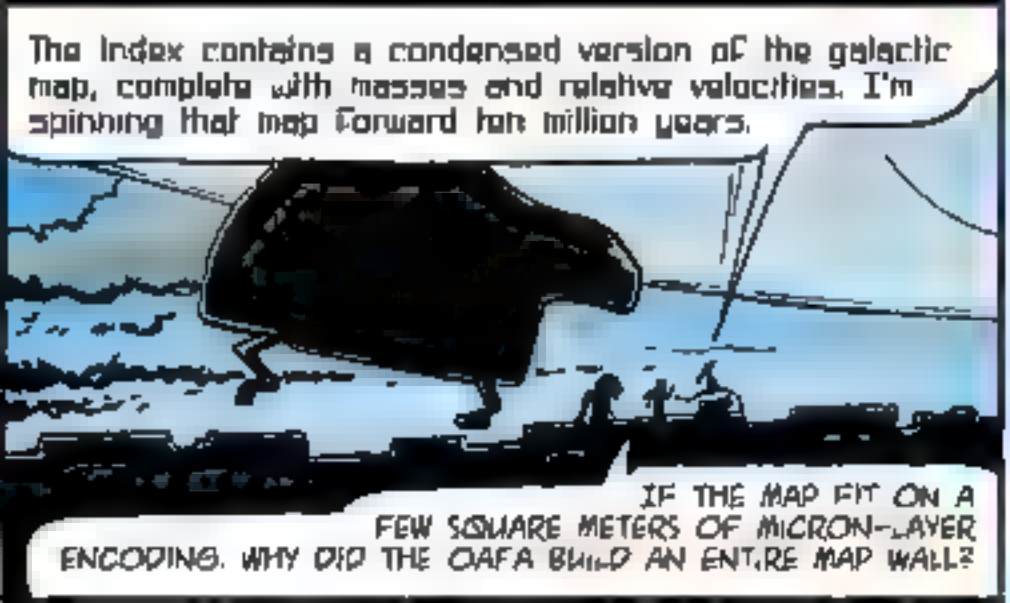

ISTHMUS GALACTICA, IN THE STORMRING OF EINA-AFA
ISTHMUS GALACTICA? REALLY?
REALLY OFFICIALLY THE COUNCIL BACK IN JUMPSTAR PRIME APPROVED MY SUGGESTION.
OF COURSE THEY DID
WHOEVER CAME UP WITH "JUMPSTAR PRIME" SET A HORRIBLE PRECEDENT

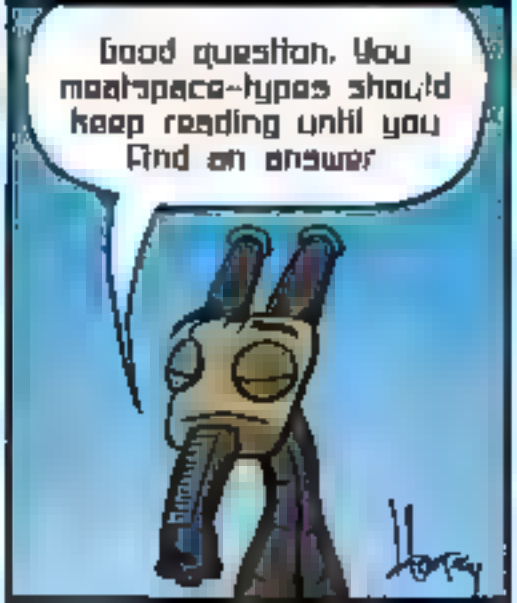

AN ISTHMUS CONNECTS TWO LARGE BODIES OF LAND. THIS RIBBON OF PROTRUDING SUPERSTRUCTURE HAS OCEAN AT BOTH ENDS.

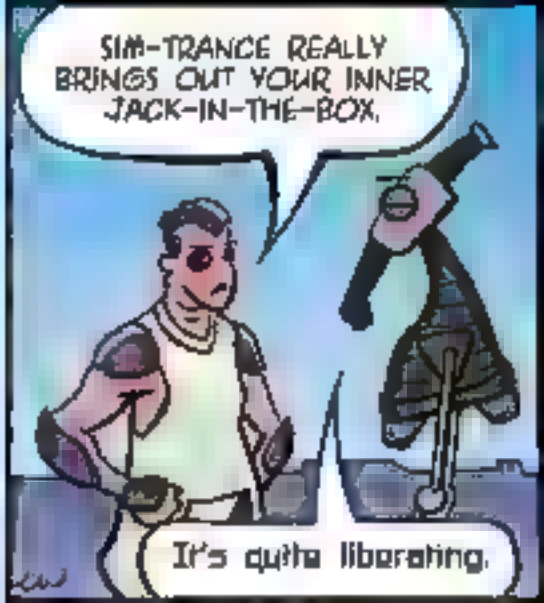
THIS "RIBBON," NOW OFFICIALLY KNOWN AS ***ISTHMUS GALACTICA,*** IS LONGER THAN ANY ISTHMUS ON EARTH, OTH, OR CELESCHUL.
THAT ARGUMENT MAKES IT EVEN ***LESS*** LIKE AN ISTHMUS.
MY NAME WAS BETTER.

YOUR NAME WAS LITERALLY ***YOUR NAME.***
I WAS THE FIRST PERSON TO POOP ON IT

IS FR3DDIE²ˣ RUNNING ANOTHER SIM?
I THINK SO. HE'S GOT SOME EXTRA LIGHTS BLINKING.
You two know that he can hear you, right?
HE'S ALSO DROPPING INTO THIRD PERSON.
DEFINITELY SIMMING.
Don't make him come over there.

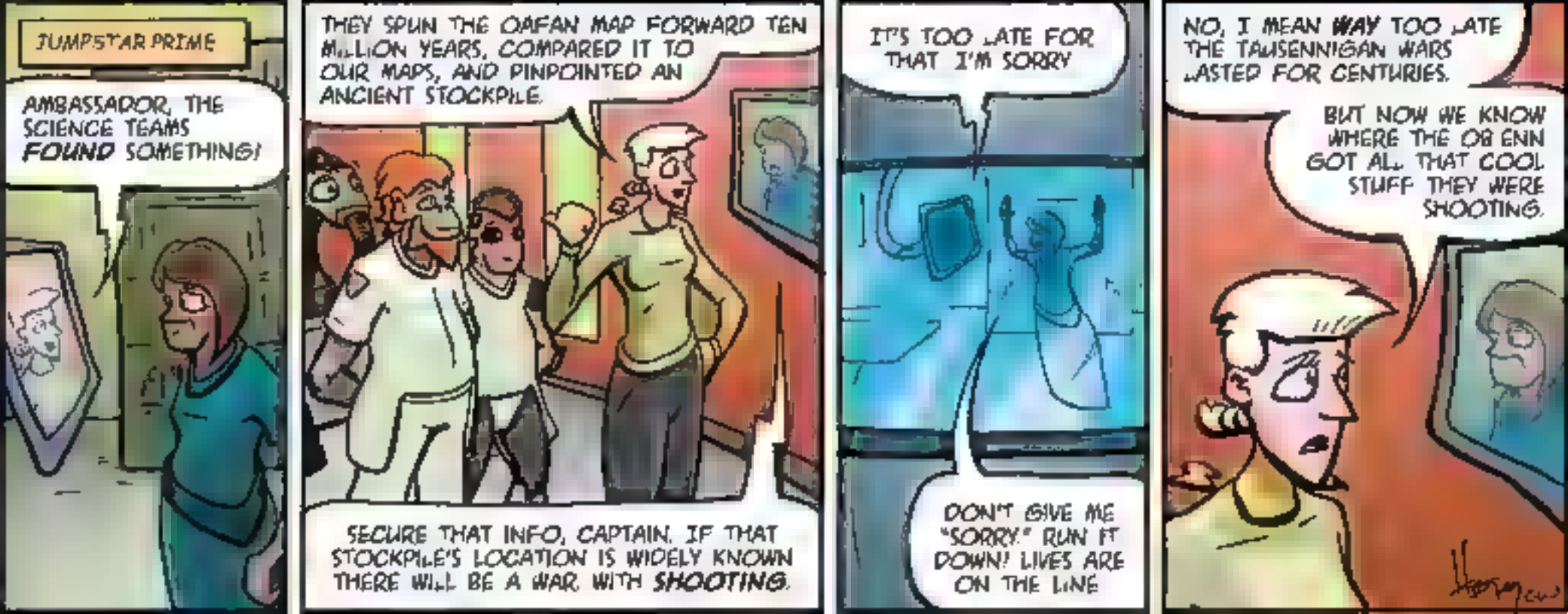

The index contains a condensed version of the galactic map, complete with masses and relative velocities. I'm spinning that map forward ten million years.
IF THE MAP FIT ON A FEW SQUARE METERS OF MICRON-LAYER ENCODING, WHY DID THE OAFA BUILD AN ENTIRE MAP WALL?

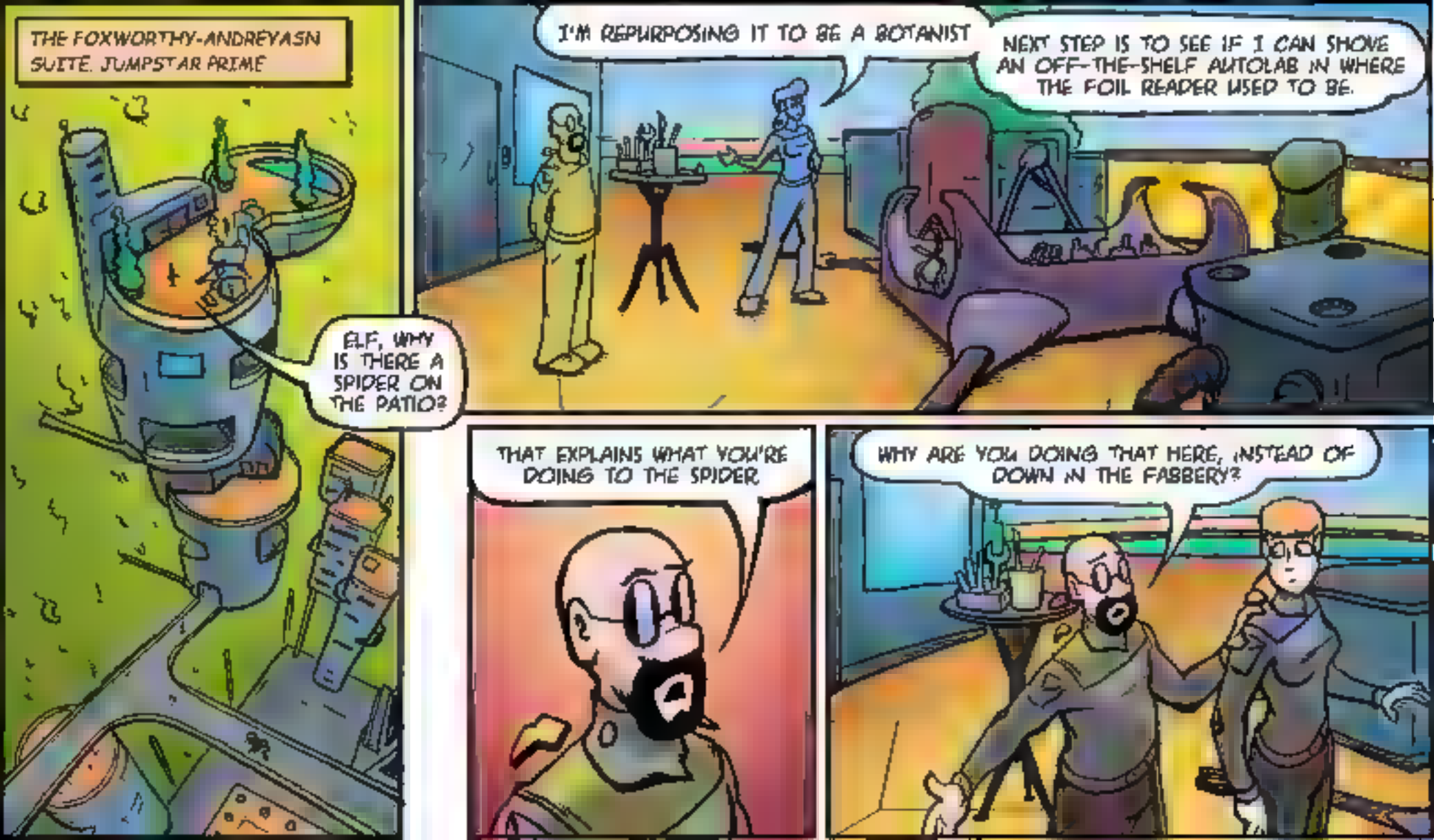

Good question. You meatspace-types should keep reading until you find an answer.

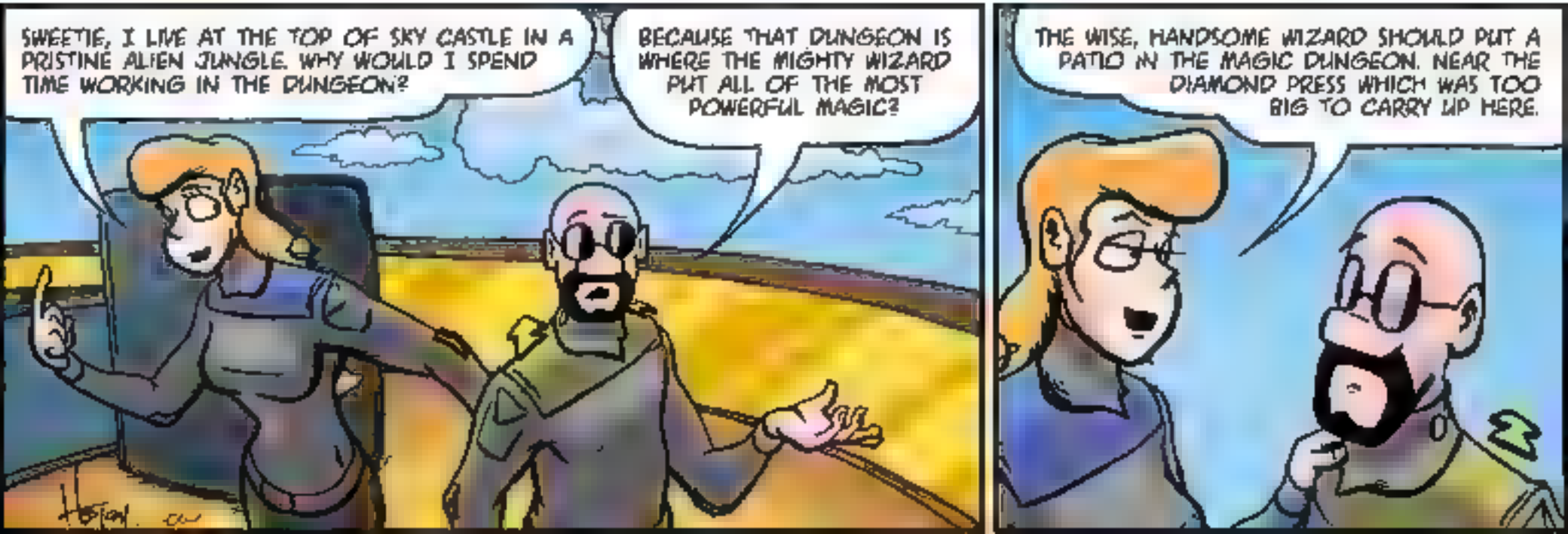

SIM-TRANCE REALLY BRINGS OUT YOUR INNER JACK-IN-THE-BOX.
It's quite liberating.

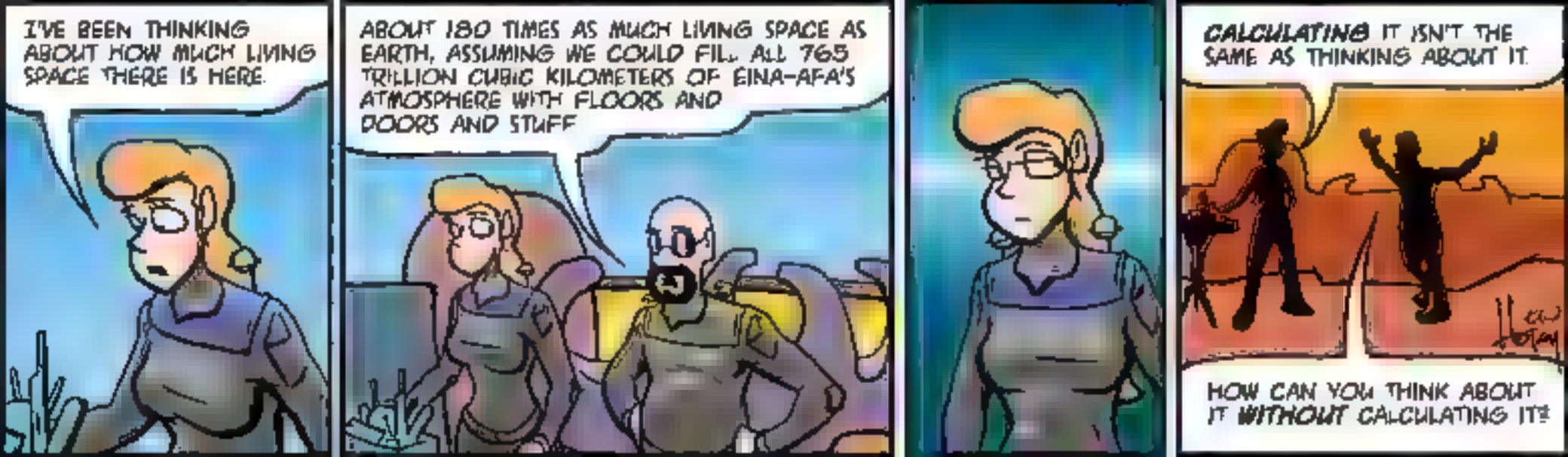
HOW FAST IS THAT SIM RUNNING UP THERE IN YOUR HEAD?
Brace for brain envy...
Because 10,000 to 1, baby.
FR3D, AT THAT RATE YOU'LL FINISH THE TEN MILLION YEAR SIM IN *A THOUSAND YEARS*.
Hey, look who moved a decimal point without checking her handbrain!
YET NO MATTER HOW SNAPPY I AM WITH DIVISION, I CAN'T COMPENSATE FOR THE GLACIAL PACE OF YOUR SIM.
Oh yeah, that's brain envy.

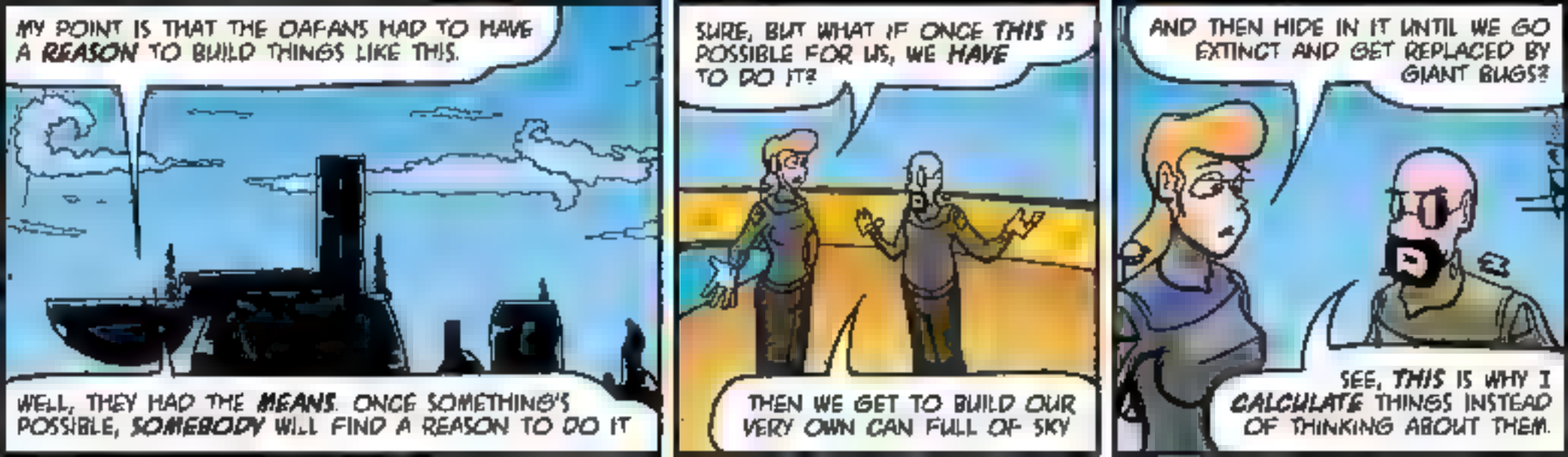
I FOUND A REALLY LONG SERIES OF MAPS. LOTS OF MAPS. FIFTY THOUSAND OF THEM, AT LEAST
I THINK THE ANCIENT OAFANS RAN THEIR OWN SIM, PLOTTING THE GALACTIC MAP FORWARD AT EIGHT-HUNDRED YEAR INTERVALS ACROSS FORTY MILLION YEARS.
SAY THAT AGAIN, SO FR3D CAN HEAR ABOUT HOW HE'S WASTING HIS TIME ON THAT SIM HE'S RUNNING.
At least now I get to check my work.
YOU WON'T HAVE ENOUGH WORK TO CHECK FOR ANOTHER 700 HOURS.

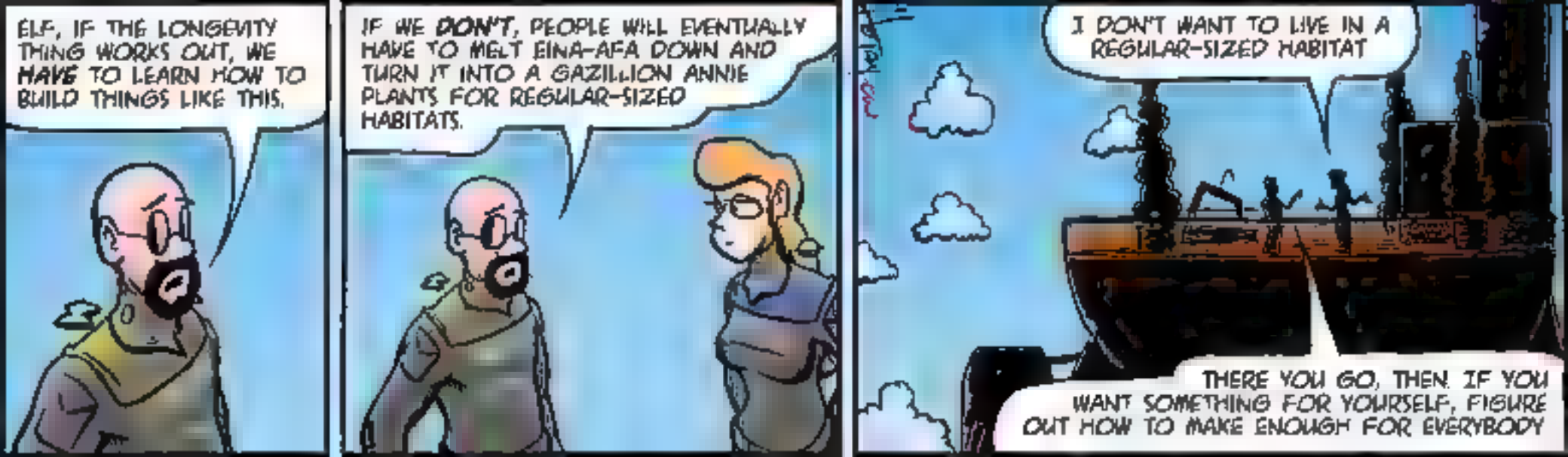

JUMPSTAR PRIME
AMBASSADOR, THE SCIENCE TEAMS FOUND SOMETHING!
THEY SPUN THE OAFAN MAP FORWARD TEN MILLION YEARS, COMPARED IT TO OUR MAPS, AND PINPOINTED AN ANCIENT STOCKPILE.
SECURE THAT INFO, CAPTAIN. IF THAT STOCKPILE'S LOCATION IS WIDELY KNOWN THERE WILL BE A WAR WITH SHOOTING.
IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT I'M SORRY
DON'T GIVE ME "SORRY." RUN IT DOWN! LIVES ARE ON THE LINE
NO, I MEAN WAY TOO LATE THE TAUSENNIGAN WARS LASTED FOR CENTURIES.
BUT NOW WE KNOW WHERE THE OB ENN GOT ALL THAT COOL STUFF THEY WERE SHOOTING.


THE FOXWORTHY-ANDREYASN SUITE. JUMPSTAR PRIME
ELF, WHY IS THERE A SPIDER ON THE PATIO?
I'M REPURPOSING IT TO BE A BOTANIST
NEXT STEP IS TO SEE IF I CAN SHOVE AN OFF-THE-SHELF AUTOLAB IN WHERE THE FOIL READER USED TO BE.
THAT EXPLAINS WHAT YOU'RE DOING TO THE SPIDER
WHY ARE YOU DOING THAT HERE, INSTEAD OF DOWN IN THE FABBERY?


SWEETIE, I LIVE AT THE TOP OF SKY CASTLE IN A PRISTINE ALIEN JUNGLE. WHY WOULD I SPEND TIME WORKING IN THE DUNGEON?
BECAUSE THAT DUNGEON IS WHERE THE MIGHTY WIZARD PUT ALL OF THE MOST POWERFUL MAGIC?
THE WISE, HANDSOME WIZARD SHOULD PUT A PATIO IN THE MAGIC DUNGEON. NEAR THE DIAMOND PRESS WHICH WAS TOO BIG TO CARRY UP HERE.

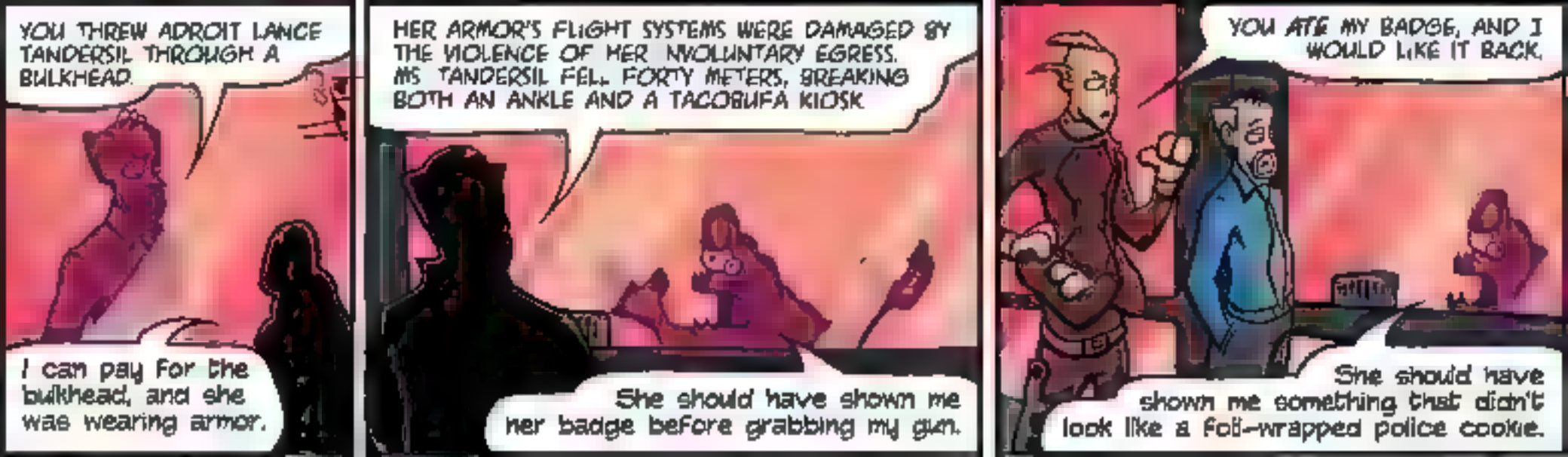

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HOW MUCH LIVING SPACE THERE IS HERE.
ABOUT 180 TIMES AS MUCH LIVING SPACE AS EARTH, ASSUMING WE COULD FILL ALL 765 TRILLION CUBIC KILOMETERS OF EINA-AFA'S ATMOSPHERE WITH FLOORS AND DOORS AND STUFF.
CALCULATING IT ISN'T THE SAME AS THINKING ABOUT IT.
HOW CAN YOU THINK ABOUT IT WITHOUT CALCULATING IT?


MY POINT IS THAT THE OAFANS HAD TO HAVE A REASON TO BUILD THINGS LIKE THIS.
WELL, THEY HAD THE MEANS. ONCE SOMETHING'S POSSIBLE, SOMEBODY WILL FIND A REASON TO DO IT
SURE, BUT WHAT IF ONCE THIS IS POSSIBLE FOR US, WE HAVE TO DO IT?
THEN WE GET TO BUILD OUR VERY OWN CAN FULL OF SKY
AND THEN HIDE IN IT UNTIL WE GO EXTINCT AND GET REPLACED BY GIANT BUGS?
SEE, THIS IS WHY I CALCULATE THINGS INSTEAD OF THINKING ABOUT THEM.

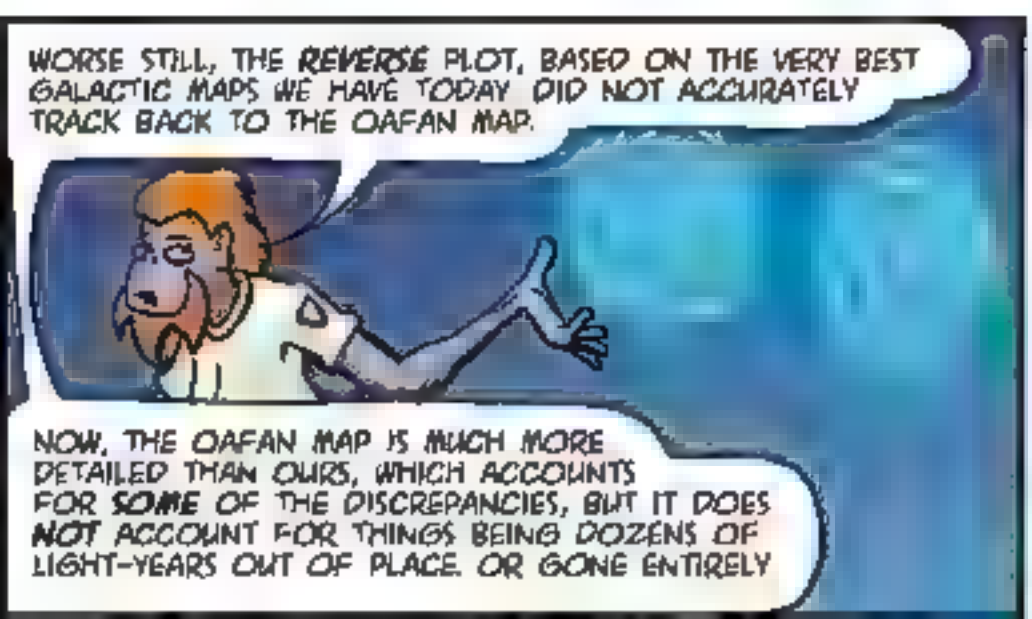

ELF, IF THE LONGEVITY THING WORKS OUT, WE HAVE TO LEARN HOW TO BUILD THINGS LIKE THIS.
IF WE DON'T, PEOPLE WILL EVENTUALLY HAVE TO MELT EINA-AFA DOWN AND TURN IT INTO A GAZILLION ANNIE PLANTS FOR REGULAR-SIZED HABITATS.
I DON'T WANT TO LIVE IN A REGULAR-SIZED HABITAT
THERE YOU GO, THEN. IF YOU WANT SOMETHING FOR YOURSELF, FIGURE OUT HOW TO MAKE ENOUGH FOR EVERYBODY

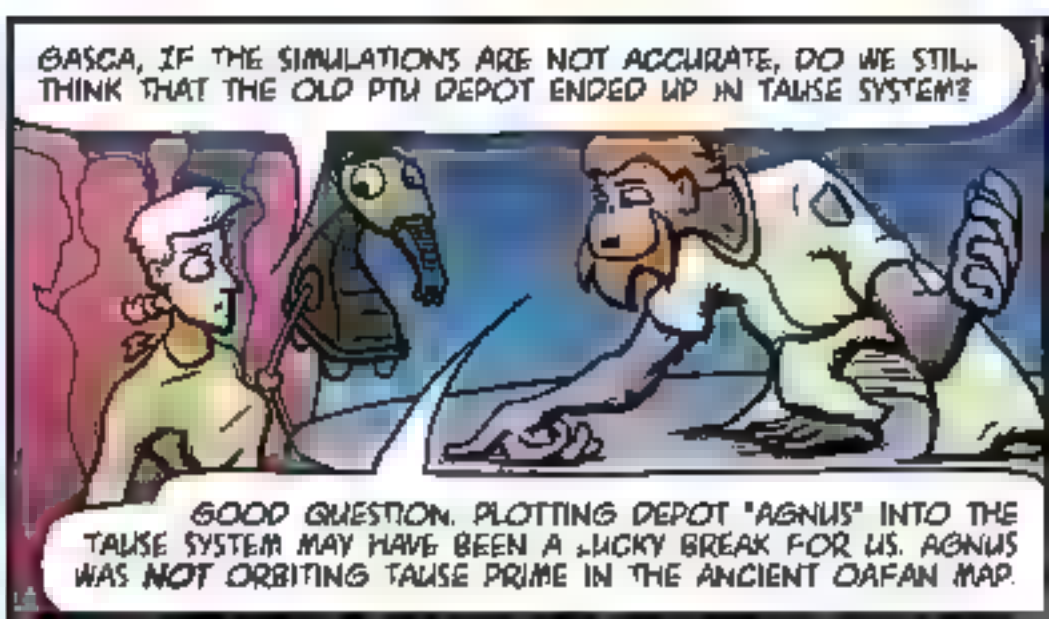
HOLDING CELL ULTRA-SEVEN, SANCTUM ADROIT PRECINCTORY JUMPSTAR PRIME.
YOU ARE GETTING SPECIAL TREATMENT
I'M THE CHIEF JUSTICE. WHEN I VISIT SOMEONE IN A HOLDING CELL, THEY ARE, BY DEFINITION, SPECIAL.
YES, I KNOW
WHAT YOU MEANT BY "SPECIAL TREATMENT" WAS "MASSEY, PLEASE JUST LET ME GO."
YOU'RE NOT THAT SPECIAL.
I'm special enough that this cell will incinerate me if I try to digest my way out of it.

All I did was take my plasgun out so I wouldn't get food on it.
YOU SLAPPED IT DOWN ON THE BAR THE MOMENT THE BARKEEP REFUSED TO MAKE A SPECIAL TRIP OUT FOR OVALKWIK TO PREPARE THE CUSTOM DRINK YOU DEMANDED.
I wasn't threatening him.
YOU WERE THREATENING HIM, BUT THE THREAT WOULD BE HARD TO PROVE IN COURT.
So I can go now?
"ASSAULTING AN OFFICER OF THE LAW" AND "RESISTING ARREST" WILL BE EASY TO PROVE.

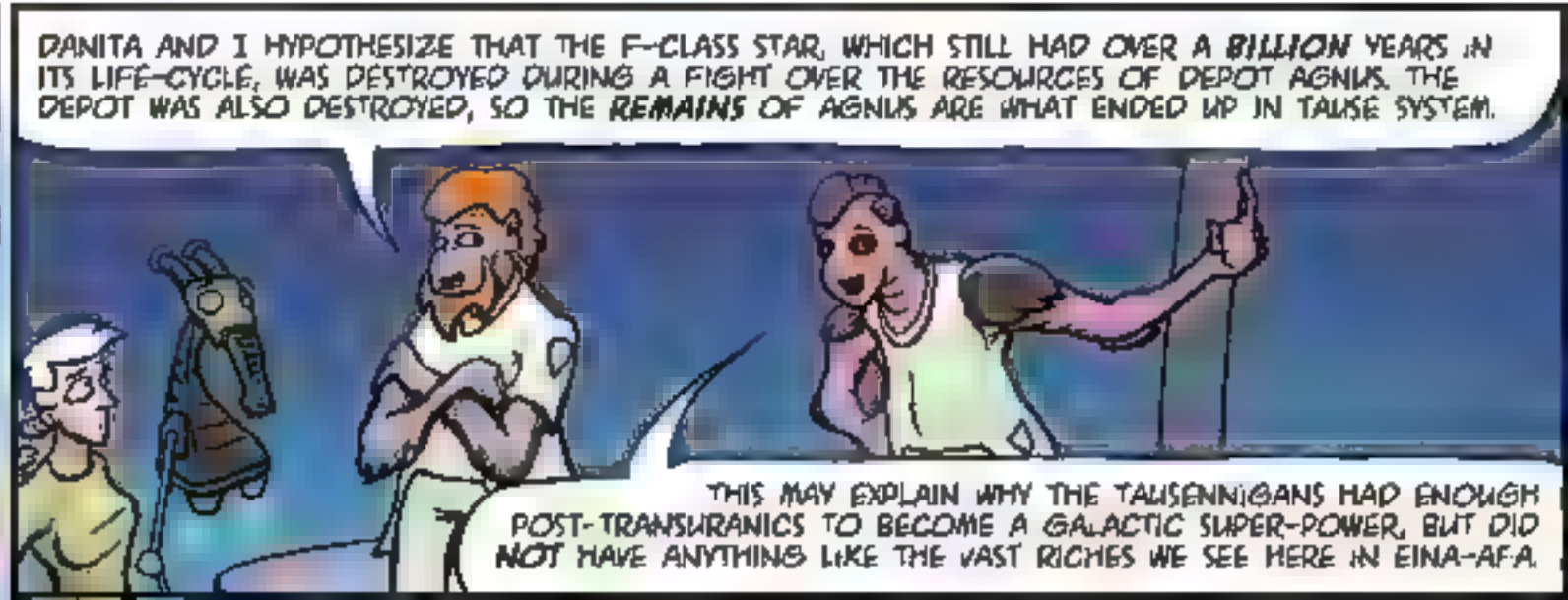

YOU THREW ADROIT LANCE TANDERSIL THROUGH A BULKHEAD.
I can pay for the bulkhead, and she was wearing armor.
HER ARMOR'S FLIGHT SYSTEMS WERE DAMAGED BY THE VIOLENCE OF HER INVOLUNTARY EGRESS. MS TANDERSIL FELL FORTY METERS, BREAKING BOTH AN ANKLE AND A TACOBUFA KIOSK.
She should have shown me her badge before grabbing my gun.
YOU ATE MY BADGE, AND I WOULD LIKE IT BACK.
She should have shown me something that didn't look like a foil-wrapped police cookie.

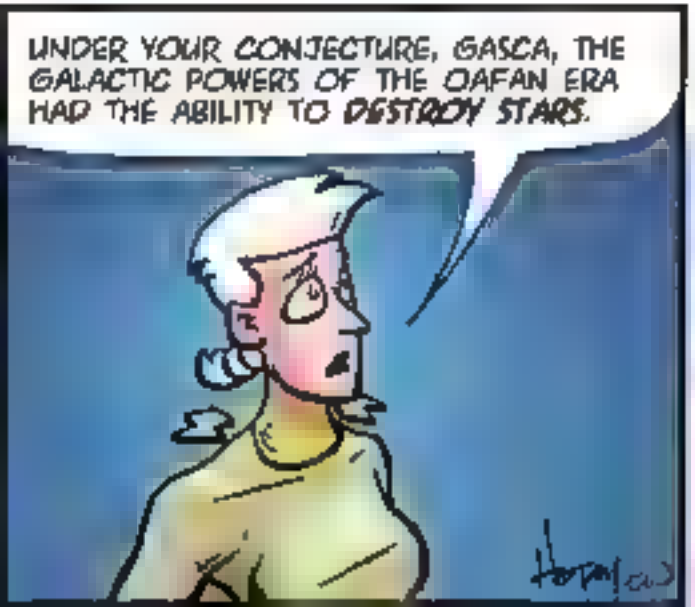
BRIEFING UNS-IAI SCIENCE VESSEL GIFT HORSE
WE GOT SOME PRIORITY SIM CYCLES ON A PROPER Q-CRUNCHER, AND SPUN THE GALAXY A BIT
WE THEN COMPARED THE SIM RESULTS TO THE ANCIENT OAFAN PREDICTION.
SHORT VERSION: THE PREDICTION IS NOT ACCURATE, AND THE GREATEST INACCURACIES ARE FOUND WHEN WE ATTEMPT TO PINPOINT LOCATIONS FOR THE STUFF WE'RE THE MOST INTERESTED IN FINDING

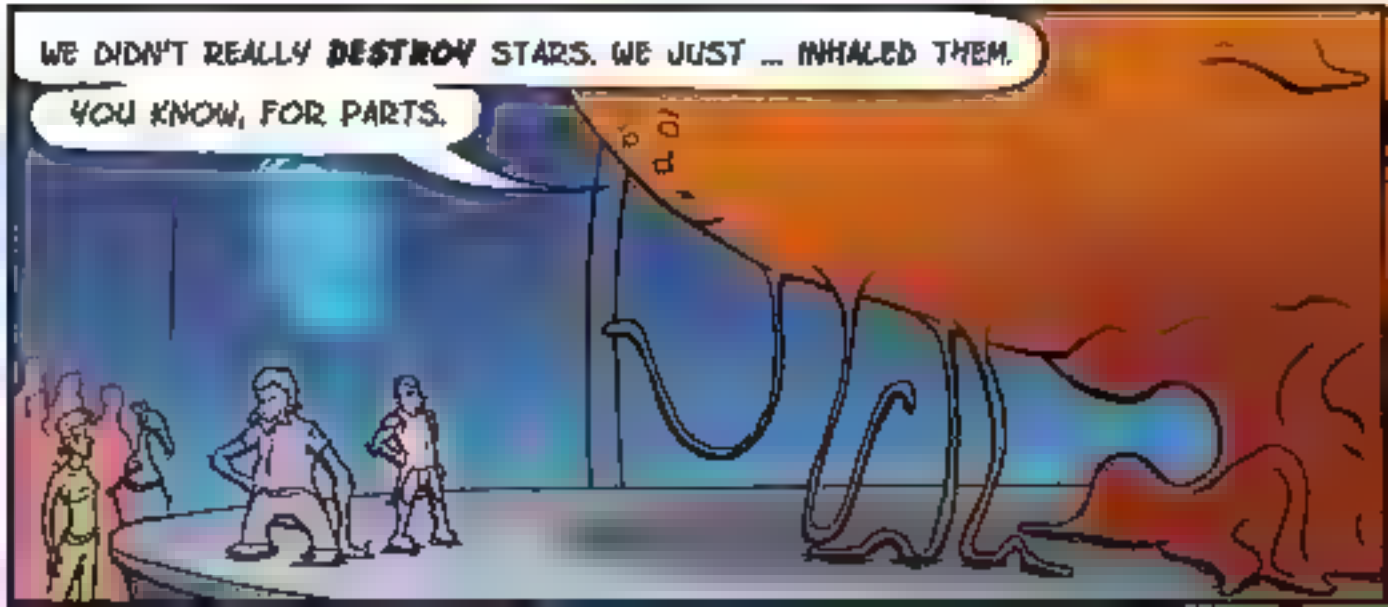

WORSE STILL, THE REVERSE PLOT, BASED ON THE VERY BEST GALACTIC MAPS WE HAVE TODAY DID NOT ACCURATELY TRACK BACK TO THE OAFAN MAP.
NOW, THE OAFAN MAP IS MUCH MORE DETAILED THAN OURS, WHICH ACCOUNTS FOR SOME OF THE DISCREPANCIES, BUT IT DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR THINGS BEING DOZENS OF LIGHT-YEARS OUT OF PLACE. OR GONE ENTIRELY


GASCA, IF THE SIMULATIONS ARE NOT ACCURATE, DO WE STILL THINK THAT THE OLD PTU DEPOT ENDED UP IN TAUSE SYSTEM?
GOOD QUESTION. PLOTTING DEPOT "AGNUS" INTO THE TAUSE SYSTEM MAY HAVE BEEN A LUCKY BREAK FOR US. AGNUS WAS NOT ORBITING TAUSE PRIME IN THE ANCIENT OAFAN MAP.

AGNUS WAS ORBITING AN F-CLASS STAR, AND THERE ARE NOW DUST CLOUDS WHERE THAT STAR SHOULD BE.

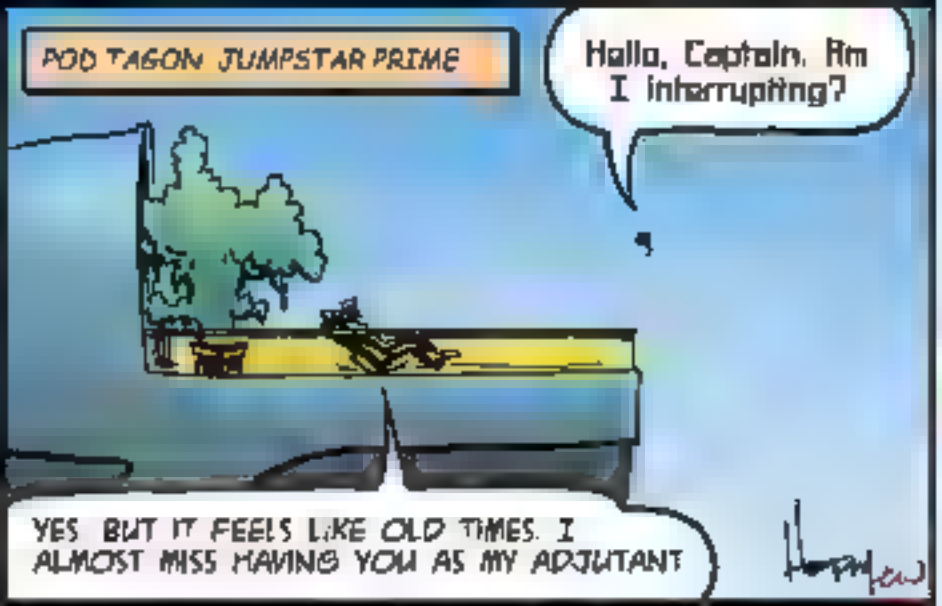

DANITA AND I HYPOTHESIZE THAT THE F-CLASS STAR, WHICH STILL HAD OVER A BILLION YEARS IN ITS LIFE-CYCLE, WAS DESTROYED DURING A FIGHT OVER THE RESOURCES OF DEPOT AGNUS. THE DEPOT WAS ALSO DESTROYED, SO THE REMAINS OF AGNUS ARE WHAT ENDED UP IN TAUSE SYSTEM.
THIS MAY EXPLAIN WHY THE TAUSENNIGANS HAD ENOUGH POST-TRANSURANICS TO BECOME A GALACTIC SUPER-POWER, BUT DID NOT HAVE ANYTHING LIKE THE VAST RICHES WE SEE HERE IN EINA-AFA.


UNDER YOUR CONJECTURE, GASCA, THE GALACTIC POWERS OF THE OAFAN ERA HAD THE ABILITY TO DESTROY STARS.

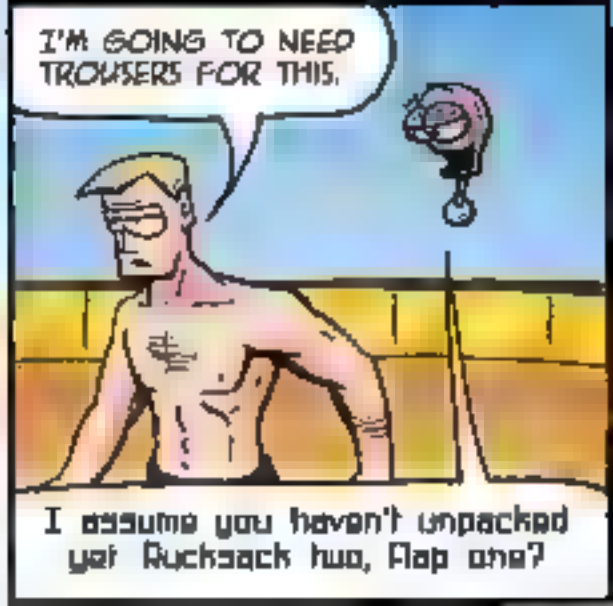

WE DIDN'T REALLY DESTROY STARS. WE JUST ... INHALED THEM.
YOU KNOW, FOR PARTS.

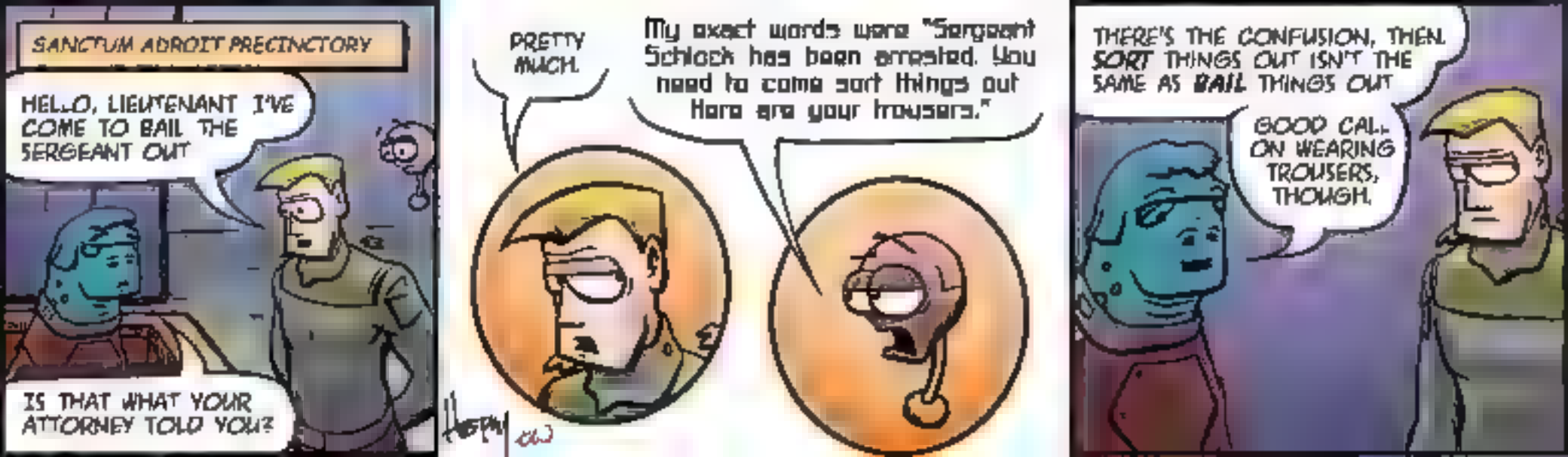
THE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN THE FORWARD SIMS AND CURRENT GALACTIC MAPS CANNOT BE EXPLAINED BY POSTULATING A SINGLE EVENT.
WHERE STARS ARE IN THE WRONG PLACE, HOWEVER, WE CAN CALCULATE THE MINIMUM FORCE REQUIRED TO PUT THEM THERE.
WE CAN THEN MAP THOSE FORCES, AND ATTEMPT TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WAS GOING ON.
AS OF NOW, THE BEST SOLUTION SET LOOKS LIKE GRAVITIC WARFARE ON A GRAND SCALE.
"GRAND?"
THROWING BIG STARS AT LITTLE STARS.
YOU KNOW, GRAND.

WE HAVE ATTEMPTED TO TRACK SEVERAL THOUSAND "POINTS OF INTEREST" THAT COULD PROVE TO BE SOURCES OF POST-TRANSURANICS.
NONE OF THEM SHOW UP ON CURRENT MAPS. WE'VE SENT SURVEY DRONES OUT, AND IN HUNDREDS OF SWEEPS WE'VE ONLY RE-DISCOVERED ONE OF THEM.
THE OAFANS CALLED IT "ULI-OA," WHICH PRETTY MUCH MEANS "WORLD-FORGE."
"HEY EVERYBODY, WE FOUND A WORLD-FORGE" SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE FIRST WORDS IN THIS BRIEFING.
BUT THEN EVERYONE WOULD HAVE LEFT EARLY.

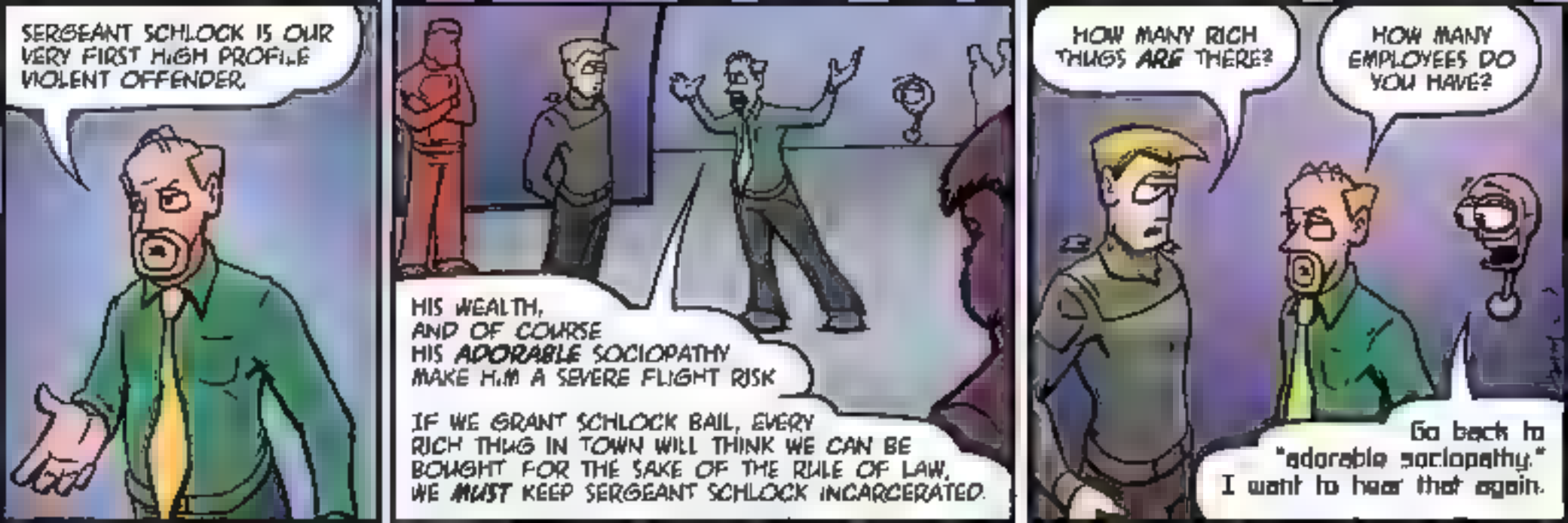

POD TAGON JUMPSTAR PRIME
Hello, Captain. Am I interrupting?
YES BUT IT FEELS LIKE OLD TIMES. I ALMOST MISS HAVING YOU AS MY ADJUTANT

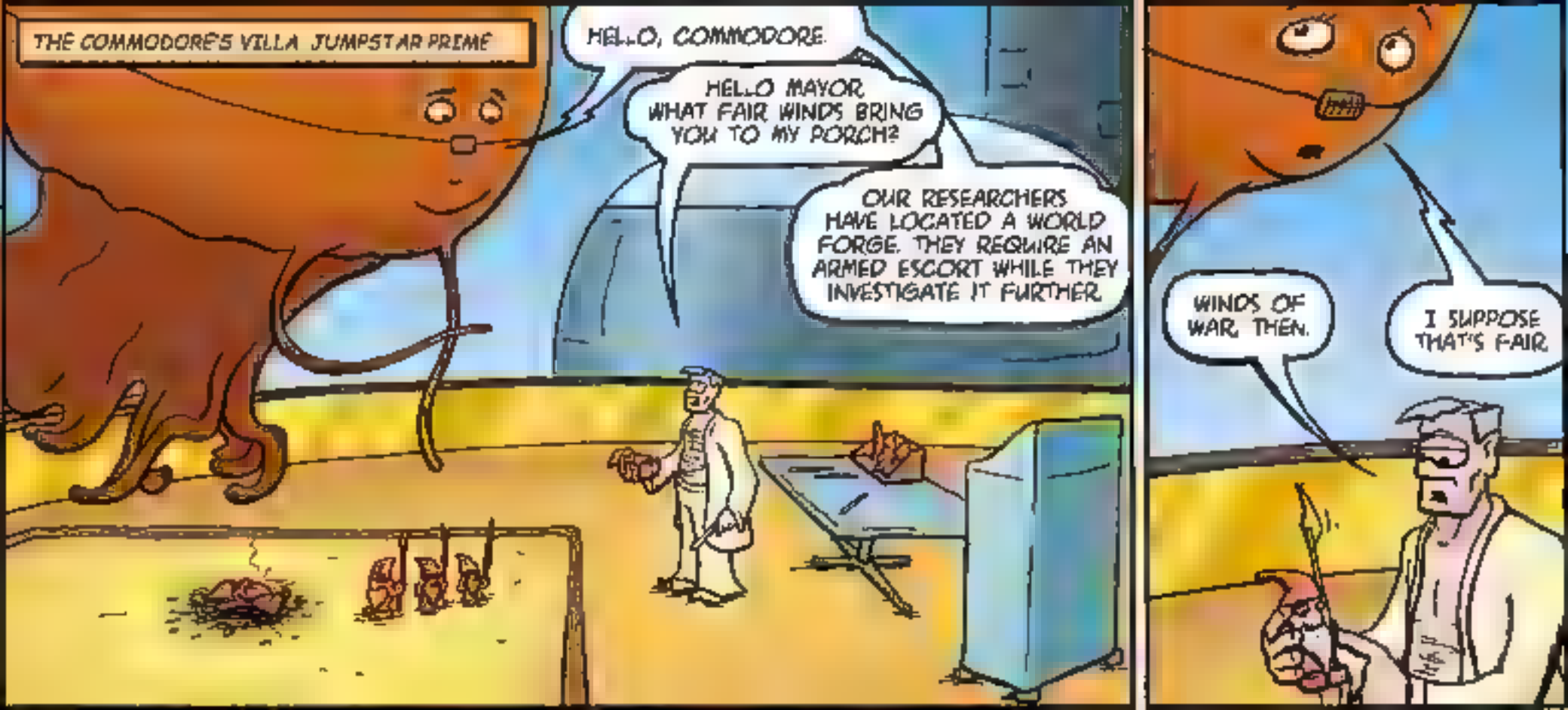
WAIT YOU WEAR MASSEY'S SHOES THESE DAYS.
I hover over them, actually. But yes, I'm our attorney, and it's why I'm visiting.

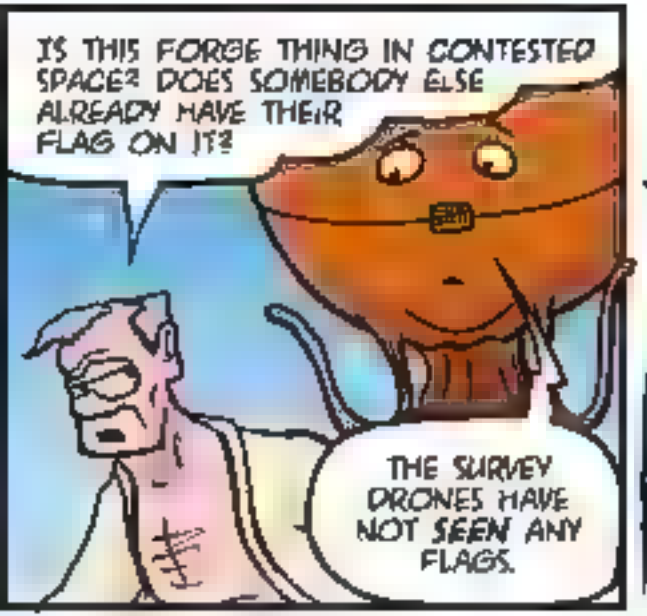

I'M GOING TO NEED TROUSERS FOR THIS.
I assume you haven't unpacked yet Rucksack two, Flap one?

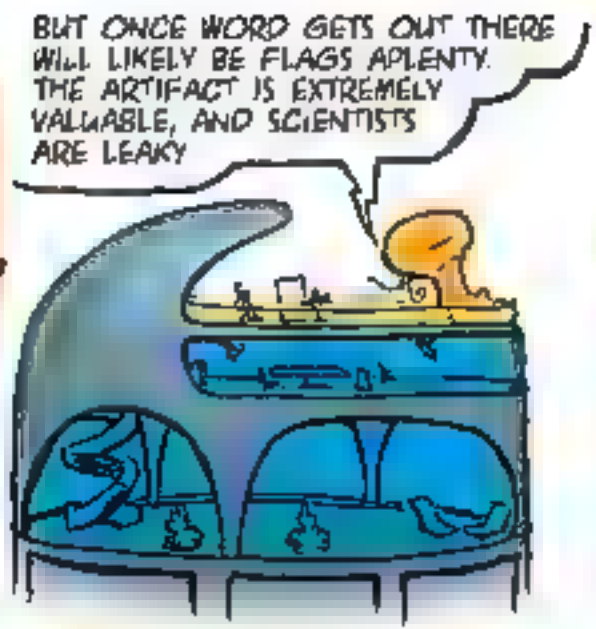

SANCTUM ADROIT PRECINCTORY
HELLO, LIEUTENANT I'VE COME TO BAIL THE SERGEANT OUT
IS THAT WHAT YOUR ATTORNEY TOLD YOU?
PRETTY MUCH.
My exact words were "Sergeant Schlock has been arrested. You need to come sort things out Here are your trousers."
THERE'S THE CONFUSION, THEN. SORT THINGS OUT ISN'T THE SAME AS BAIL THINGS OUT
GOOD CALL ON WEARING TROUSERS, THOUGH.

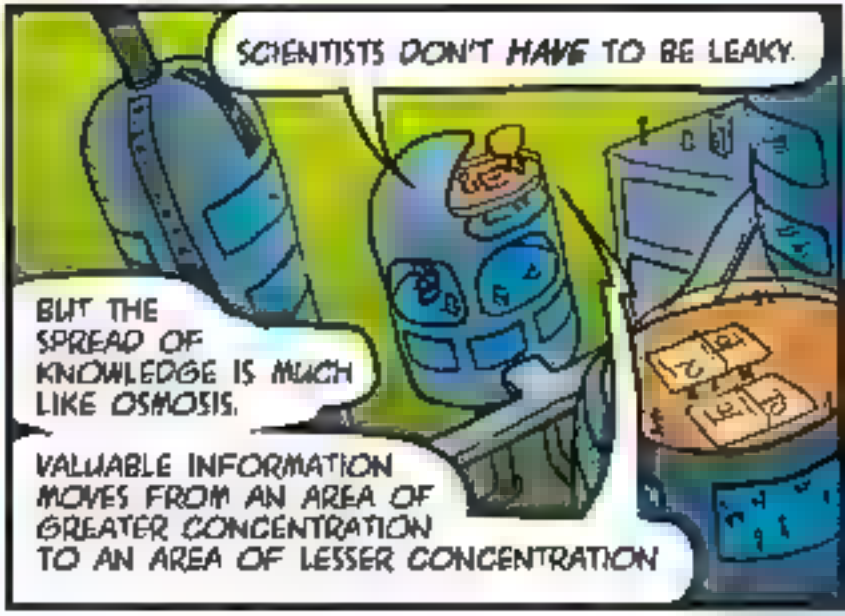
THE SERGEANT WILL NOT BE ALLOWED OUT ON BAIL.
YOU DO REALIZE THAT WE CAN PAY PRETTY MUCH ANY AMOUNT THAT HAS REAL NUMBERS IN IT, RIGHT?
I SHOULD LET THE CHIEF JUSTICE EXPLAIN. HE SAYS IT BETTER THAN I DO.
THE SERGEANT WILL NOT BE ALLOWED OUT ON BAIL.
HOW IS THAT ANY BETTER?
IT CAME OUT OF MY MOUTH, SO YOU CAN'T APPEAL IT

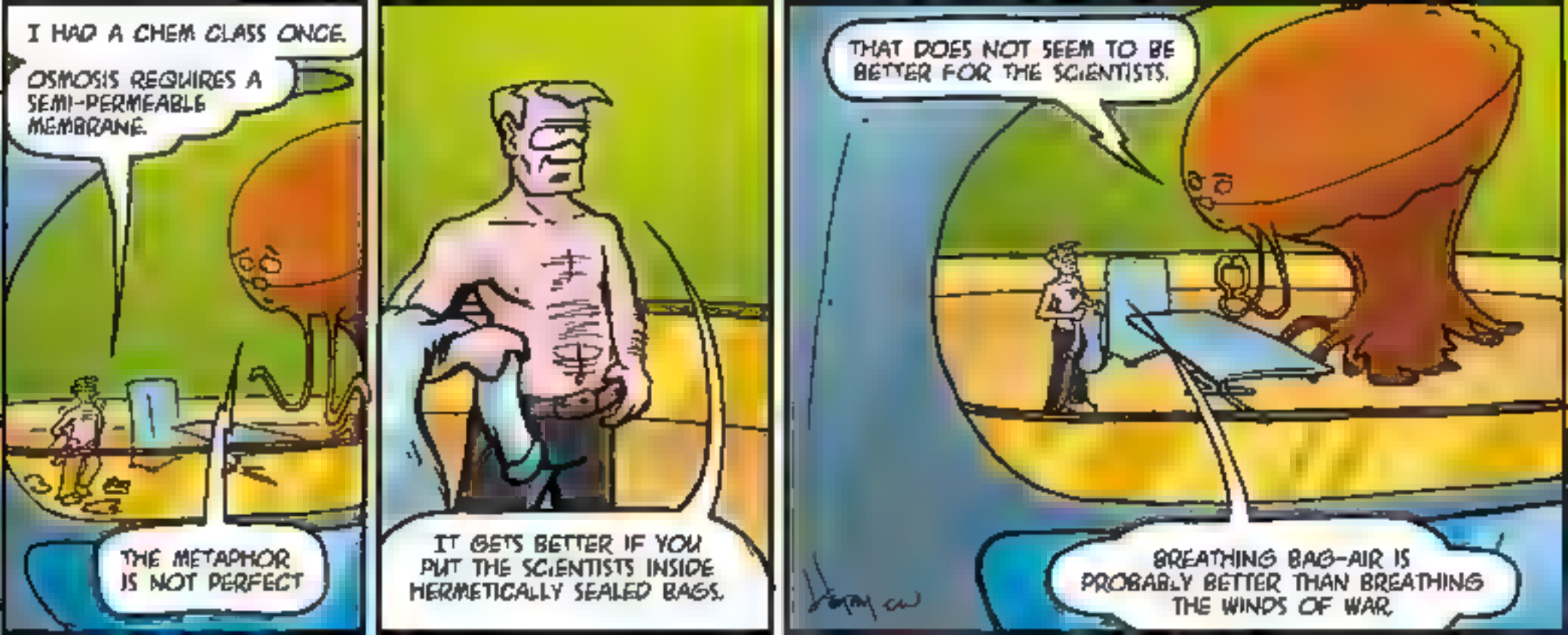

SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS OUR VERY FIRST HIGH PROFILE VIOLENT OFFENDER.
HIS WEALTH, AND OF COURSE HIS ADORABLE SOCIOPATHY MAKE HIM A SEVERE FLIGHT RISK
IF WE GRANT SCHLOCK BAIL, EVERY RICH THUG IN TOWN WILL THINK WE CAN BE BOUGHT FOR THE SAKE OF THE RULE OF LAW. WE MUST KEEP SERGEANT SCHLOCK INCARCERATED.
HOW MANY RICH THUGS ARE THERE?
HOW MANY EMPLOYEES DO YOU HAVE?
Go back to "adorable sociopathy." I want to hear that again.


THE COMMODORE'S VILLA JUMPSTAR PRIME
HELLO, COMMODORE.
HELLO MAYOR. WHAT FAIR WINDS BRING YOU TO MY PORCH?
OUR RESEARCHERS HAVE LOCATED A WORLD FORGE. THEY REQUIRE AN ARMED ESCORT WHILE THEY INVESTIGATE IT FURTHER.
WINDS OF WAR, THEN.
I SUPPOSE THAT'S FAIR.


IS THIS FORGE THING IN CONTESTED SPACE? DOES SOMEBODY ELSE ALREADY HAVE THEIR FLAG ON IT?
THE SURVEY DRONES HAVE NOT SEEN ANY FLAGS.


BUT ONCE WORD GETS OUT THERE WILL LIKELY BE FLAGS APLENTY. THE ARTIFACT IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE, AND SCIENTISTS ARE LEAKY


SCIENTISTS DON'T HAVE TO BE LEAKY.
BUT THE SPREAD OF KNOWLEDGE IS MUCH LIKE OSMOSIS.
VALUABLE INFORMATION MOVES FROM AN AREA OF GREATER CONCENTRATION TO AN AREA OF LESSER CONCENTRATION


I HAD A CHEM CLASS ONCE.
OSMOSIS REQUIRES A SEMI-PERMEABLE MEMBRANE.
THE METAPHOR IS NOT PERFECT
IT GETS BETTER IF YOU PUT THE SCIENTISTS INSIDE HERMETICALLY SEALED BAGS.
THAT DOES NOT SEEM TO BE BETTER FOR THE SCIENTISTS.
BREATHING BAG-AIR IS PROBABLY BETTER THAN BREATHING THE WINDS OF WAR.

JUMPSTAR PRIME FABBERY
WE SHIP OUT TONIGHT EVERYTHING I'VE TAGGED GETS SCHLEPPED TO THE SHUTTLE
BY US?
I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU HATE SHIFTING CARGO, BUT IT WON'T SHIFT ITSELF
CAPTAIN, DEAR DO YOU REALIZE THAT YOU SAID THOSE WORDS TO THE BEST ROBOTICIST IN THE WORLD?
DID I JUST THROW DOWN A GAUNTLET?
ONE THOUSAND CRYPT SPIDERS ARE ABOUT TO GET NEW INSTRUCTIONS, AND BACKPACKS.

SANCTUM ADROIT PRECINCTORY
NICE WORK SERGEANT YOU'RE STUCK HERE UNTIL YOUR TRIAL. WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF?
It's not my fault! All I wanted to do was get really buzzed so I wouldn't have to think about Ebby.
THAT WOULD BE A MUCH BETTER ANSWER IF EBBY WAS ACTUALLY DEAD
Have you visited him?
YES, AND THE DOCTOR ASSURED ME THAT THE DROOLING IS TEMPORARY

MEDBAY ABOARD THE BROKEN WIND
I DON'T KNOW WHAT SENT THINGS SIDEWAYS, BUT WE CAN FIX THIS.
ANGH THABBAL! ONNA THONNA WUB, GOSHOBBIN.
YOUR WORDS DON'T MEAN ANYTHING, BUT YOUR TONE SUGGESTS THAT YOU'RE ANGRY
AND SO DOES YOUR FACE. THAT'S PROGRESS! WE'RE TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY THERE
WUB GHOBBIS TOH ANPH THONNAPO.

BOARDING
YOU HEARD ABOUT EBBY?
SCHLOCK WAS YELLING ABOUT IT JUST BEFORE HE GOT ARRESTED.
ARRESTED? HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?
WITH TWO SHOCK-WANDS, AN ARMORED BAG, AND MAYBE A LITTLE BIT OF HELP FROM ME.
YOU HELPED THE POLICE SHOVE YOUR SERGEANT INTO AN ARMORED BAG?
DON'T BE RIDICULOUS. I WAS THE ONE WITH THE SHOCK WANDS.

WE HAVE A POLICY THAT COVERS THIS. WHEN WE'RE OFF DUTY, AND NOT ON AN AUTHORIZED OPERATION, CIVILIANS OUTRANK US.
SO THE POLICE ORDERED YOU TO HELP THEM ARREST SCHLOCK FOR SOMETHING?

WHAT THE OFFICER SAID WAS "AAUGH..." AND THEN SOME STUFF I DIDN'T HEAR BECAUSE SHE WAS FALLING OUT OF EARSHOT
I CHOSE TO INTERPRET THAT AS "PLEASE ARREST THAT AMORPH BEFORE HIS TEMPER TANTRUM DESTROYS THIS LOVELY DRINKING ESTABLISHMENT AND ITS HIGH CEILINGS."

I DIDN'T WANT A CONVERTED BATTLEPLATE POD. MY NEW PLACE IS SCRATCH-BUILT, COMPLETELY CUSTOM.
SUNDECK, SPA, COMBO-KITCHEN, AND PLENTY OF ROOM TO JUST PUTTER.
IT'S A HUNDRED AND FIFTY CUBIC METERS OF DISTILLED COMFORT.
THEN WHY AREN'T YOU USING YOUR HAPPY VOICE?
IF THEY DELIVER IT ON SCHEDULE, I'LL BE TWENTY THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS AWAY BY THE TIME IT'S READY FOR ME TO MOVE IN.

THE MERCENARY WARSHIP BROKEN WIND ARRIVES AT ULI-OA.

IT LOOKS... "FUZZY"

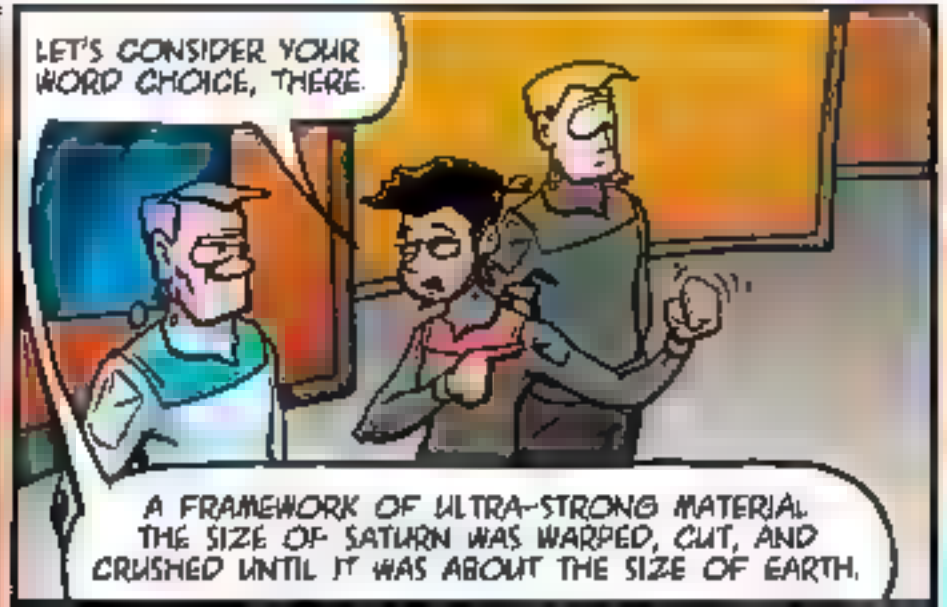
NOT "LOOKS." *IS.* GASCA SAYS THE FUZZ IS FEATURES THAT EXTEND HUNDREDS OF KILOMETERS ABOVE THE NOMINAL SURFACE.

AND NO, WHAT WE'RE ORBITING DOES NOT LOOK ANYTHING LIKE WHAT THE OAFANS DOCUMENTED ON ISTHMUS GALACTICA.

THIS IS ULI-OA AS PICTURED BY THE OAFANS.

HERE'S A PICTURE OF WHAT WE'RE ORBITING, WHAT WE EXPECTED, AND THE GAS GIANT SATURN. FOR SCALE

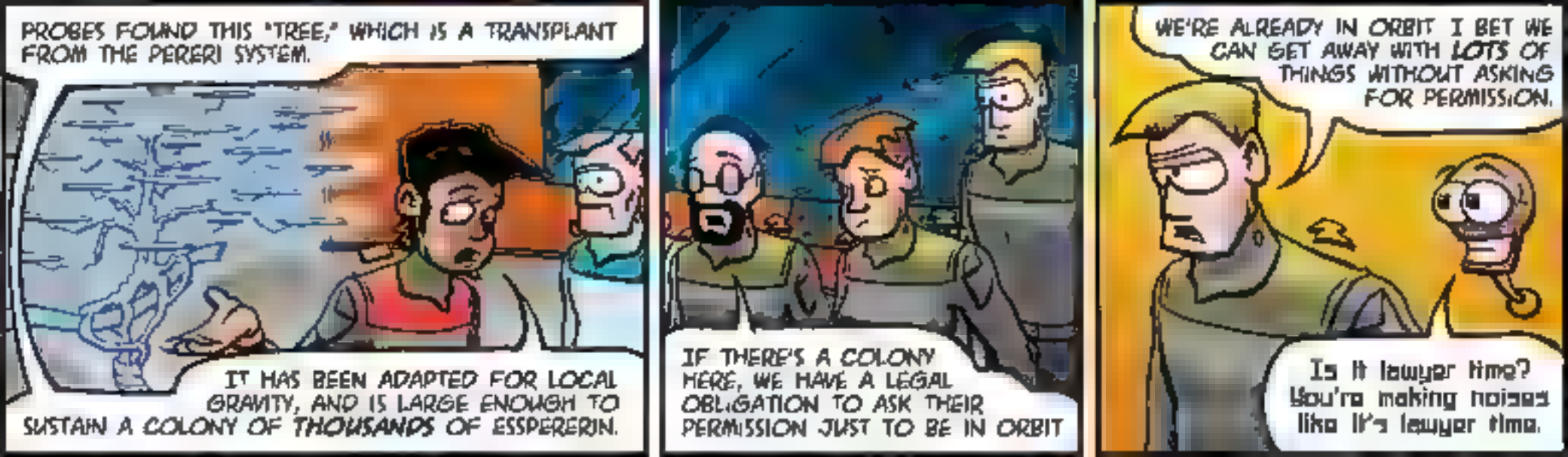
IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY SMUSHED IT.


LET'S CONSIDER YOUR WORD CHOICE, THERE.
A FRAMEWORK OF ULTRA-STRONG MATERIAL THE SIZE OF SATURN WAS WARPED, CUT, AND CRUSHED UNTIL IT WAS ABOUT THE SIZE OF EARTH.

"ULTRA-SMUSHED." WE GET IT.
STOP TRYING TO PUT "SENSE OF WONDER" INTO YOUR BRIEFING.

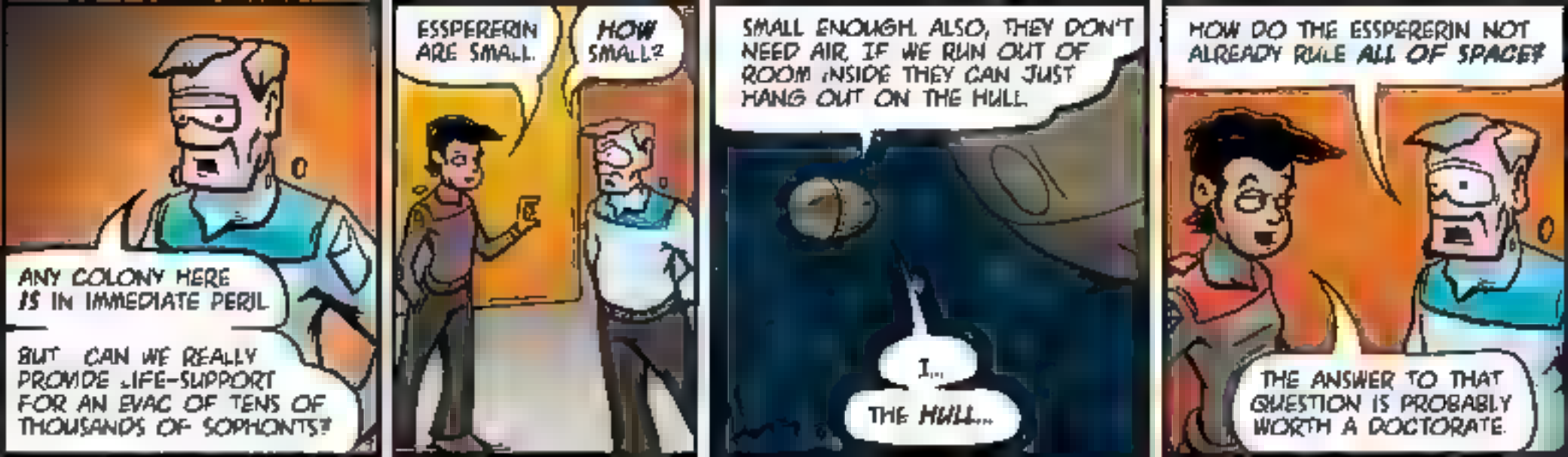
CAN WE UN-CRUMPLE IT AND FIGURE OUT HOW IT WORKS?
IT'S SUPER-STRONG, AND IT'S THE SIZE OF A PLANET. MAYBE SOMEONE COULD UN-CRUMPLE IT, EVENTUALLY, BUT NOT US, AND DEFINITELY NOT NOW.
SO IT'S USELESS.
HEY, WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO LEARN THINGS WITHOUT BENDING IT BACK INTO SHAPE.
ALSO, IT'S WORTH SO MUCH MONEY THAT ITS VALUE CANNOT BE EXPRESSED WITH MONEY.
SO IT'S USELESS, AND WE CAN'T SELL IT.

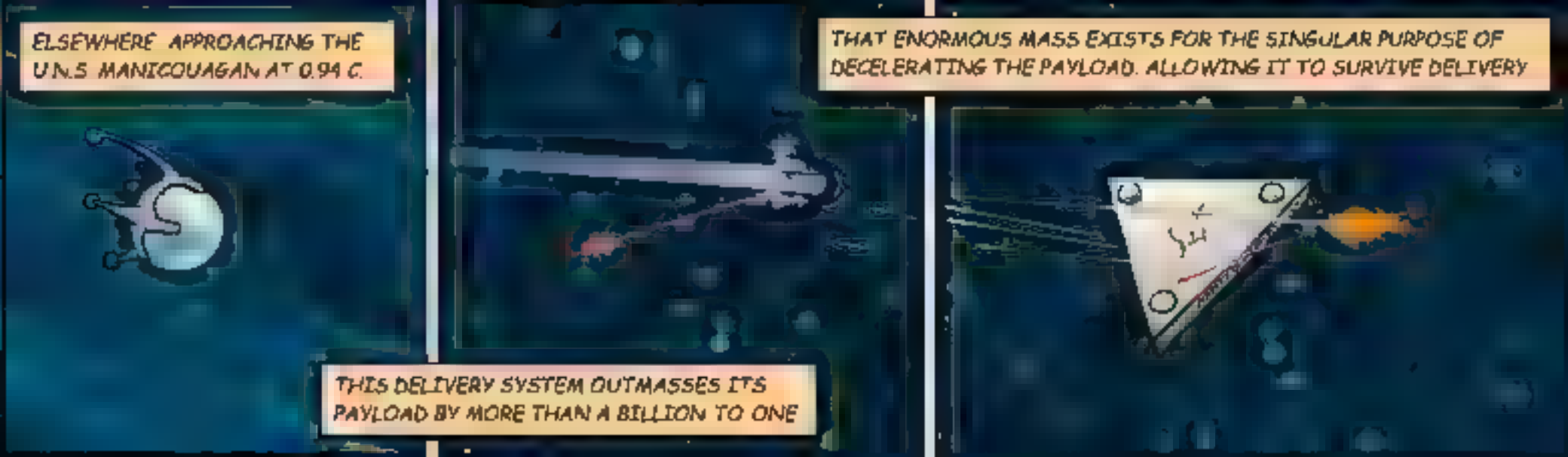
THIS WORLD-SIZED WAD OF PTU IS SO VALUABLE THAT NOBODY CAN HOPE TO DEFEND IT AGAINST EVERYONE WHO WILL WANT A PIECE.
ON THE UP-SIDE, ULI-OA'S EXISTENCE PROTECTS EINA-AFA BETTER THAN ANY WEAPONS CAN.
HOW SO?
IT'S A MORE COST-EFFECTIVE TARGET. IT'S WAY RICHER THAN EINA-AFA, AND NOBODY LIVES HERE.
COMMODORE. I HAVEN'T SAID NOBODY LIVES HERE.
ARE YOU GOING TO SAY THAT?

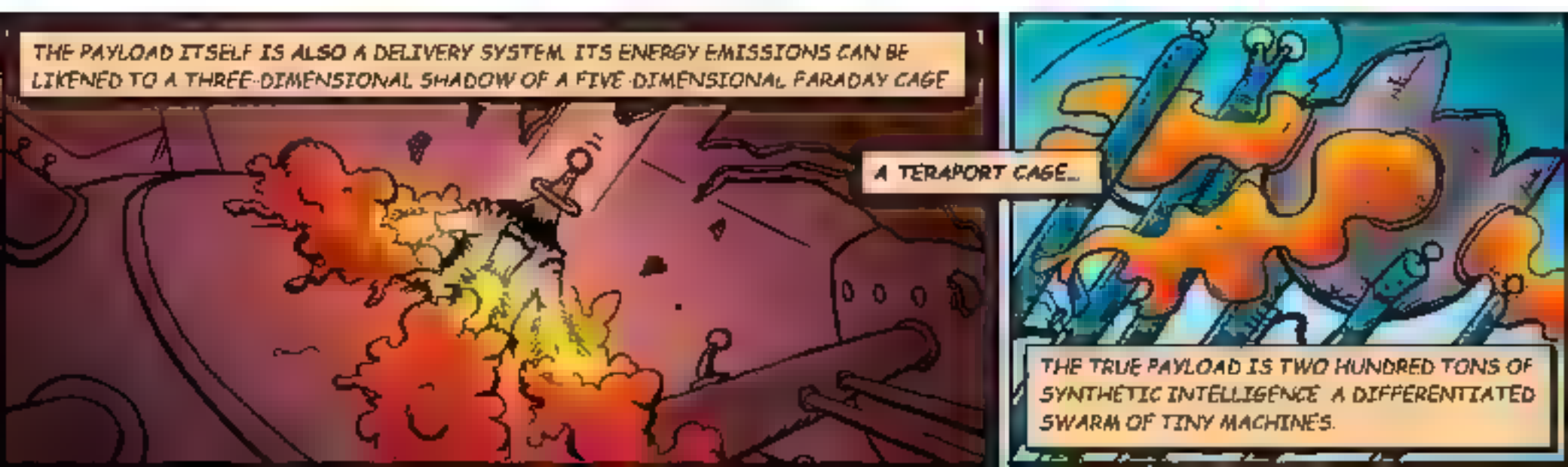

PROBES FOUND THIS "TREE," WHICH IS A TRANSPLANT FROM THE PERERI SYSTEM.
IT HAS BEEN ADAPTED FOR LOCAL GRAVITY, AND IS LARGE ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN A COLONY OF THOUSANDS OF ESSPERERIN.
IF THERE'S A COLONY HERE, WE HAVE A LEGAL OBLIGATION TO ASK THEIR PERMISSION JUST TO BE IN ORBIT
WE'RE ALREADY IN ORBIT I BET WE CAN GET AWAY WITH LOTS OF THINGS WITHOUT ASKING FOR PERMISSION.
Is it lawyer time? You're making noises like it's lawyer time.

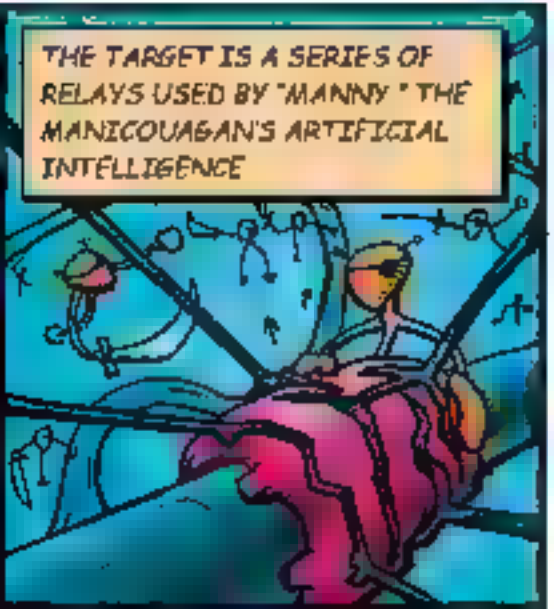
Consider this scenario: After Uli-Da inevitably becomes a war zone, our orbital violation will come to light.
Some greedy party will sue, and the case will be made that our uninvited arrival resulted in the entire conflict
Actual damages will easily total more than our entire net worth, significant though that is.
OKAY, SUNSHINE, LET'S HAVE THE BEST-CASE SCENARIO.
That was it. Worst-case is us being held hostages by the court as the entire judicial system collapses during a Galactic War

ENNESBY, YOU'VE GOT TOO MUCH IMAGINATION, AND NOT ENOUGH ACTUAL IMAGINATION.
HERE'S WHAT WE DO: SIGNAL THE COLONY BELOW "WE FOUND YOUR WORLD ON A MAP, AND ,TS LOCATION IS NO LONGER A SECRET."
"IT APPEARS INDEFENSIBLE WOULD YOU LIKE US TO HELP YOU EVACUATE BEFORE THE MOB ARRIVES?"
MADE IN GOOD FAITH, THAT OFFER PUTS US UNDER SAMARITAN CLAUSES.
BOOM. WE'RE HERE LEGALLY.
ARE WE THE GOOD GUYS IF WE'RE THIS CRAFTY ABOUT BEING THE GOOD GUYS?
I'M A CAREER GOOD-GUY. THIS QUALIFIES AS "JUSTIFIABLY CRAFTY RIGHTEOUSNESS."

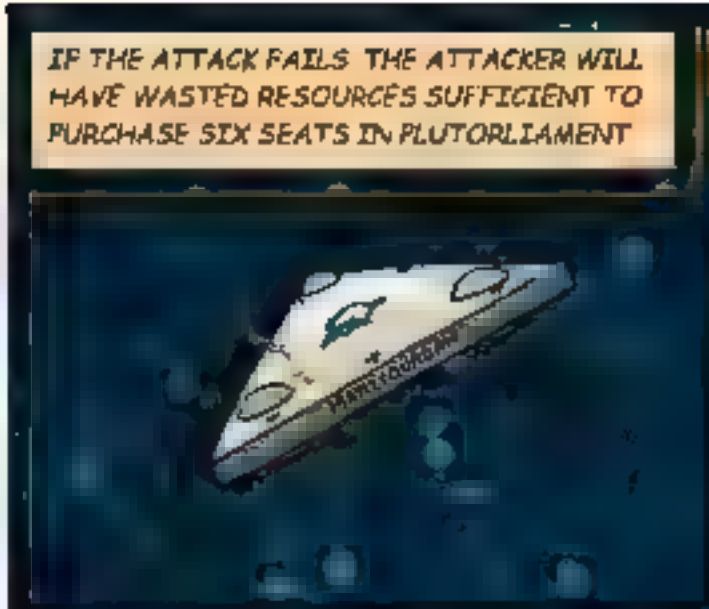

ANY COLONY HERE IS IN IMMEDIATE PERIL
BUT CAN WE REALLY PROVIDE LIFE-SUPPORT FOR AN EVAC OF TENS OF THOUSANDS OF SOPHONTS?
ESSPERERIN ARE SMALL.
HOW SMALL?
SMALL ENOUGH. ALSO, THEY DON'T NEED AIR. IF WE RUN OUT OF ROOM INSIDE THEY CAN JUST HANG OUT ON THE HULL.
I...
THE HULL...
HOW DO THE ESSPERERIN NOT ALREADY RULE ALL OF SPACE?
THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION IS PROBABLY WORTH A DOCTORATE.


ELSEWHERE APPROACHING THE U.N.S MANICOUAGAN AT 0.94 C.
THIS DELIVERY SYSTEM OUTMASSES ITS PAYLOAD BY MORE THAN A BILLION TO ONE
THAT ENORMOUS MASS EXISTS FOR THE SINGULAR PURPOSE OF DECELERATING THE PAYLOAD. ALLOWING IT TO SURVIVE DELIVERY


THE PAYLOAD ITSELF IS ALSO A DELIVERY SYSTEM. ITS ENERGY EMISSIONS CAN BE LIKENED TO A THREE-DIMENSIONAL SHADOW OF A FIVE-DIMENSIONAL FARADAY CAGE
A TERAPORT CAGE...
THE TRUE PAYLOAD IS TWO HUNDRED TONS OF SYNTHETIC INTELLIGENCE. A DIFFERENTIATED SWARM OF TINY MACHINES.

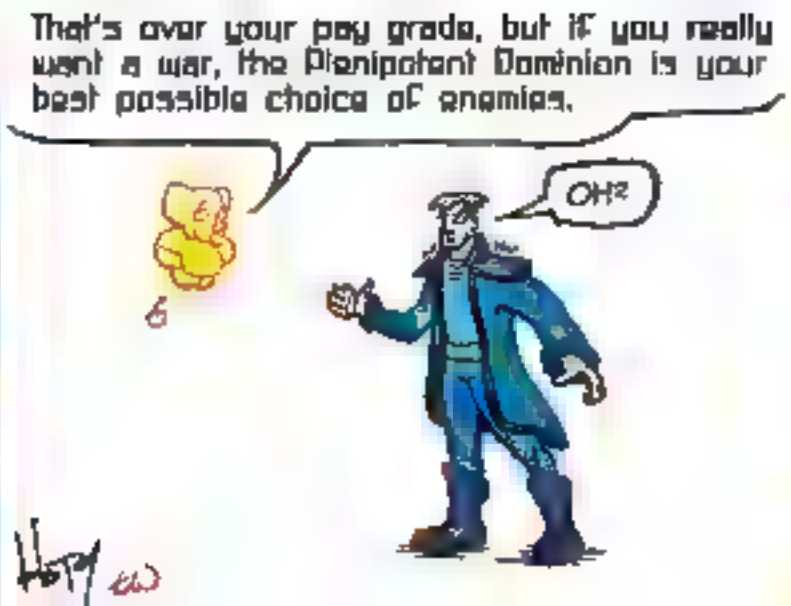

THE TARGET IS A SERIES OF RELAYS USED BY "MANNY" THE MANICOUAGAN'S ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

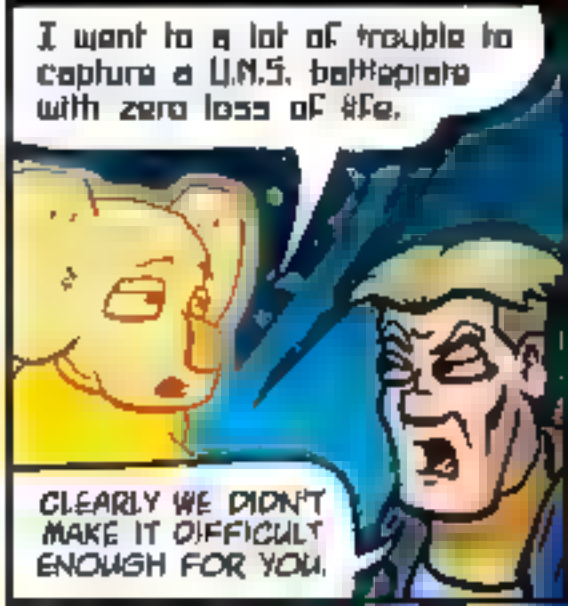
MANNY CAN SHUNT HIMSELF TO BACKUP RELAYS, BUT THE SPEED OF THIS ATTACK IS MEANT TO TRAP HIM BEFORE HE CAN REACH A CLEAN ONE


IF THE ATTACK FAILS THE ATTACKER WILL HAVE WASTED RESOURCES SUFFICIENT TO PURCHASE SIX SEATS IN PLUTORLIAMENT

IF THE ATTACK SUCCEEDS?
Hello, Admiral.
MANICOUAGAN
YOU...
YOU HACKED MY BATTLEPLATE.

Your A.I., Manny, is fine. He's upset, and surprised, but I couldn't have done this without surprising him.
PETEY... THIS IS AN ACT OF WAR.


That's over your pay grade, but if you really want a war, the Plenipotent Dominion is your best possible choice of enemies.
OH?

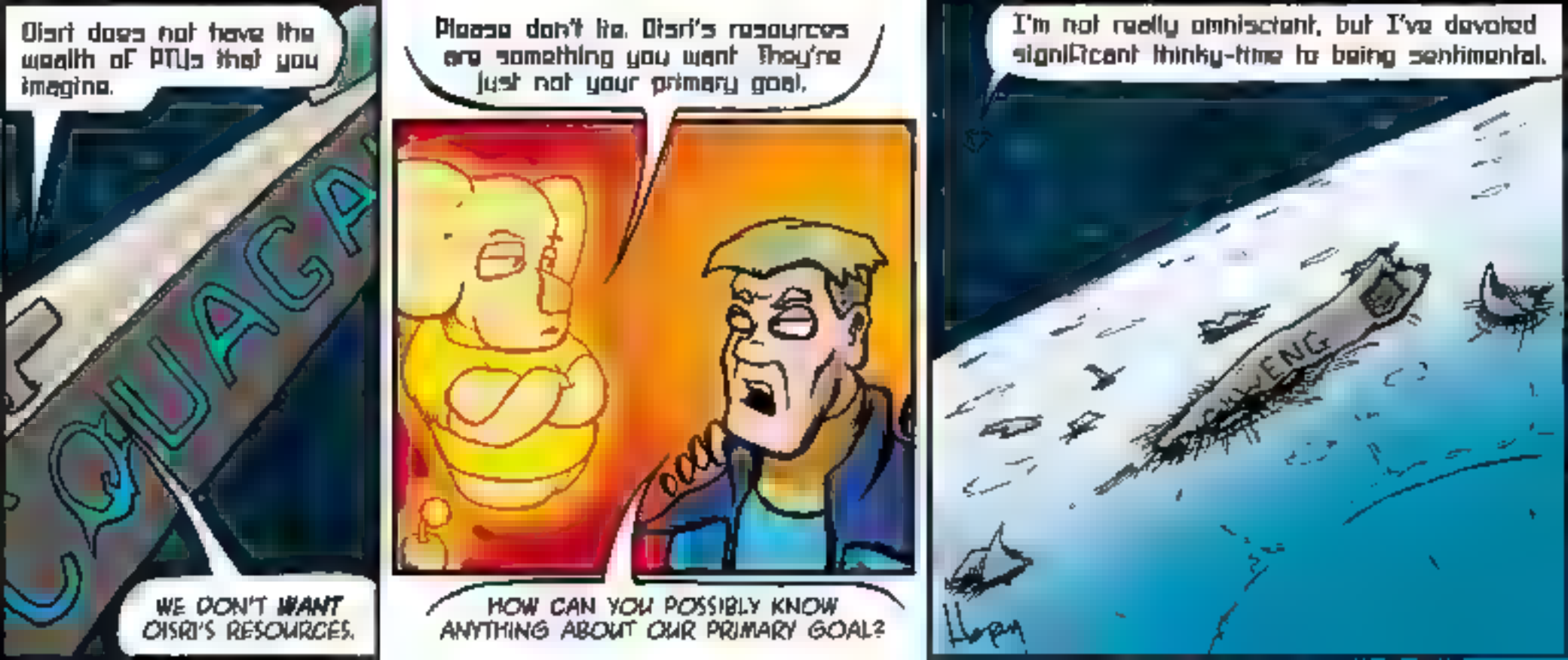

I went to a lot of trouble to capture a U.N.S. battleplate with zero loss of life.
CLEARLY WE DIDN'T MAKE IT DIFFICULT ENOUGH FOR YOU.

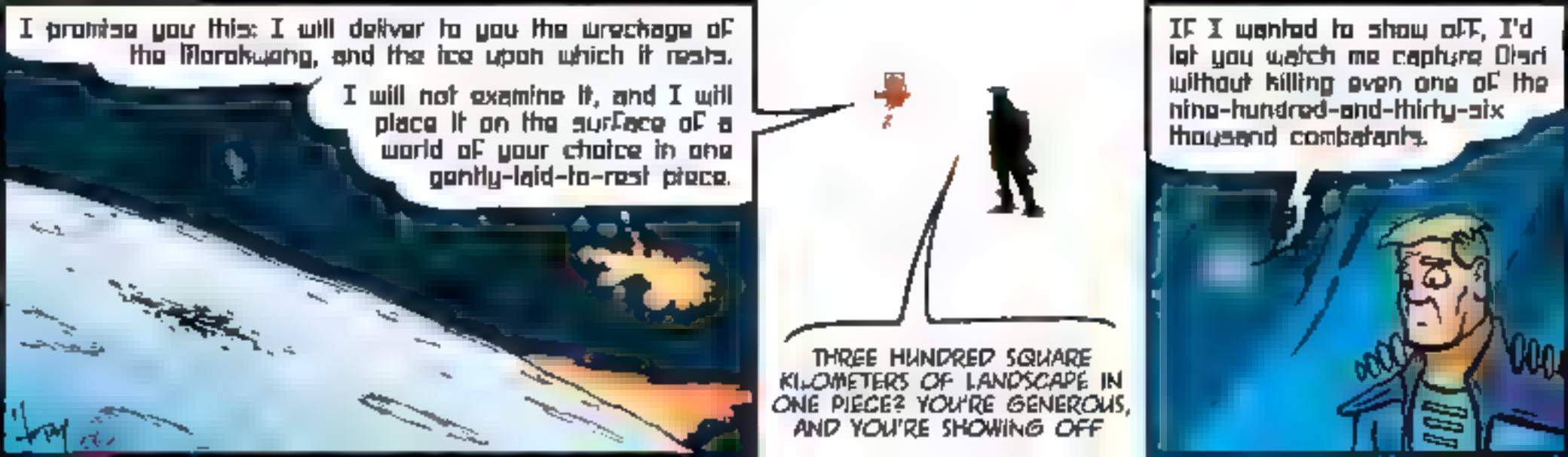
YOU HAVE SOME VERY NICE VESSELS OF YOUR OWN. WHY DO YOU WANT MY BATTLEPLATE?
Not "why."
"Where."

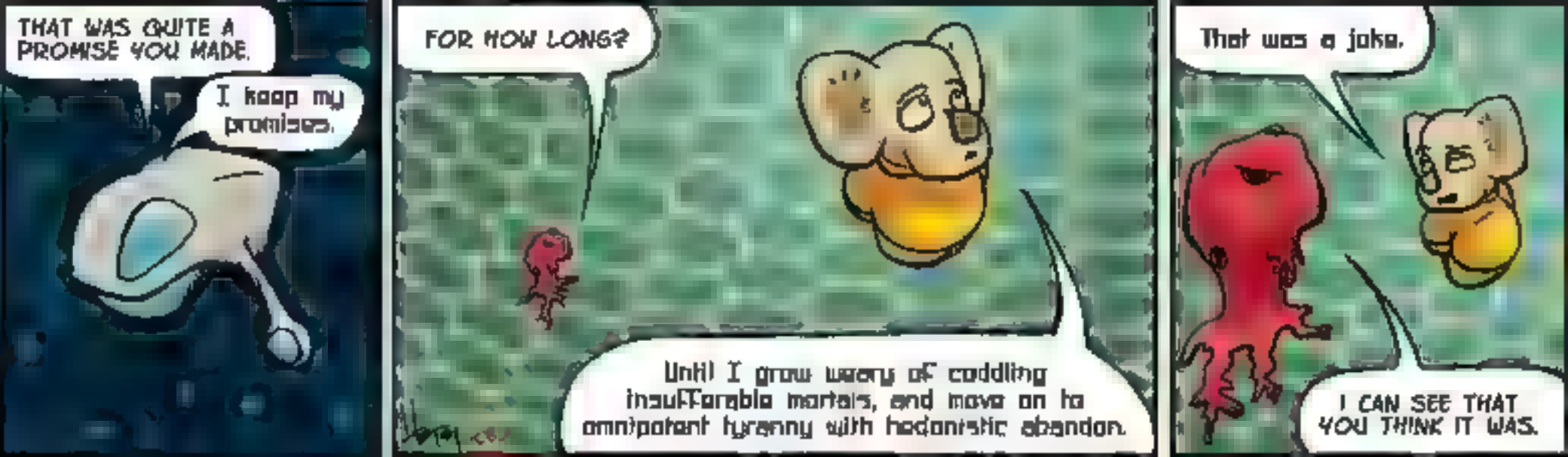
FINE WHERE DO YOU WANT MY BATTLEPLATE?

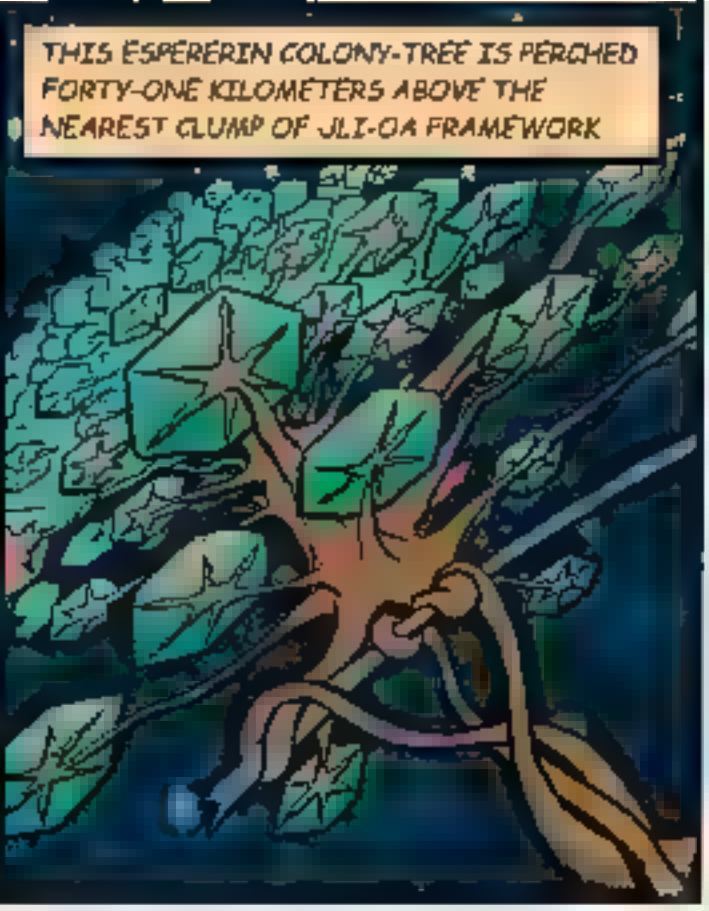
Not here.

YOU'RE AFTER OISRI. YOU WANT IT ALL TO YOURSELF
It's a ten-million-year-old artifact which still works. Of course I want it
HAVE YOU CONSIDERED SHARING IT?
Nobody else here seems to be sharing.
WE'RE NEGOTIATING, VIA AN AMICABLE EXCHANGE OF WEAPON FIRE.


Oisri does not have the wealth of PTUs that you imagine.
WE DON'T WANT OISRI'S RESOURCES.
Please don't lie. Oisri's resources are something you want. They're just not your primary goal.
HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT OUR PRIMARY GOAL?
I'm not really omniscient, but I've devoted significant thinky-time to being sentimental.

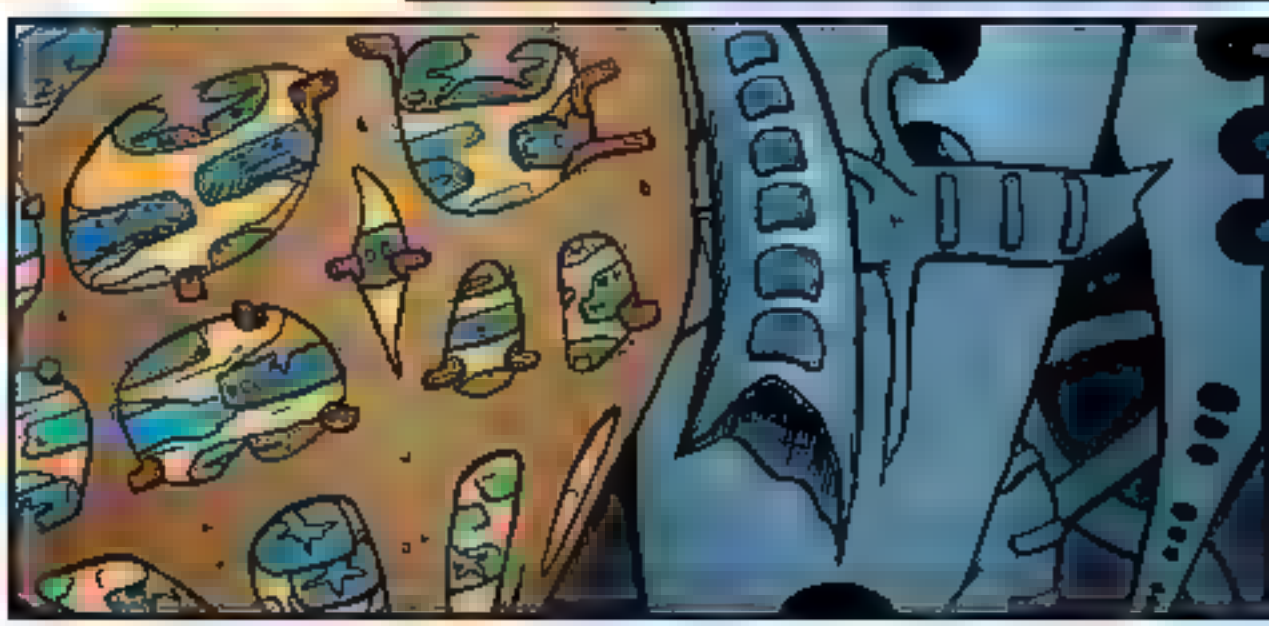

I promise you this: I will deliver to you the wreckage of the Morokwang, and the ice upon which it rests.
I will not examine it, and I will place it on the surface of a world of your choice in one gently-laid-to-rest piece.
THREE HUNDRED SQUARE KILOMETERS OF LANDSCAPE IN ONE PIECE? YOU'RE GENEROUS, AND YOU'RE SHOWING OFF
If I wanted to show off, I'd let you watch me capture Olari without killing even one of the nine-hundred-and-thirty-six thousand combatants.

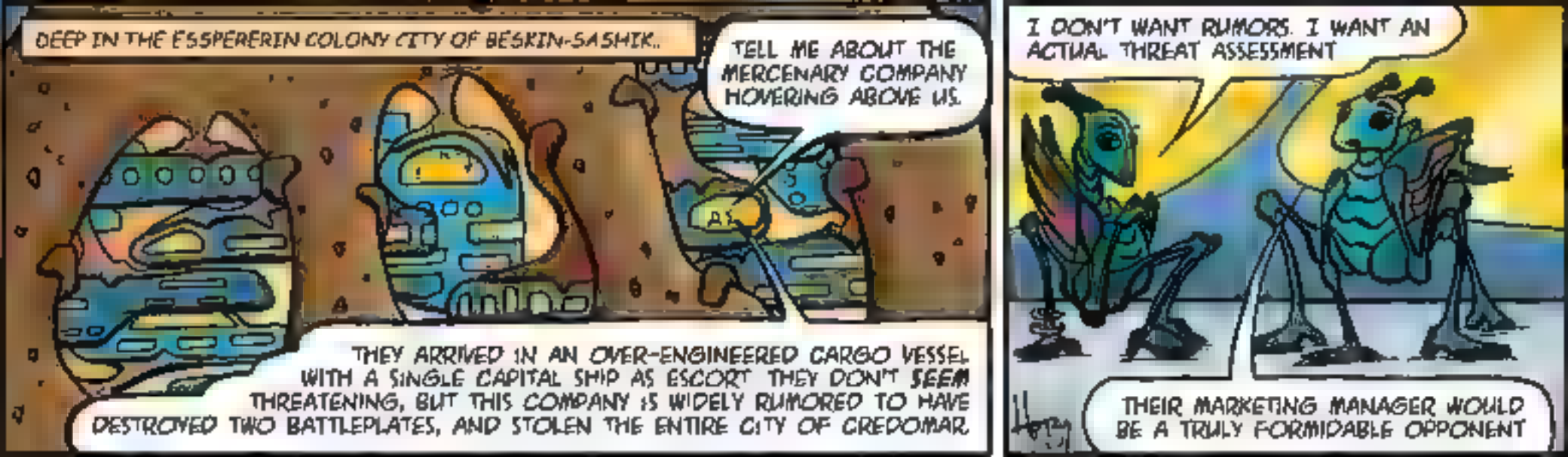

THAT WAS QUITE A PROMISE YOU MADE.
I keep my promises.
FOR HOW LONG?
Until I grow weary of coddling insufferable mortals, and move on to omnipotent tyranny with hedonistic abandon.
That was a joke.
I CAN SEE THAT YOU THINK IT WAS.

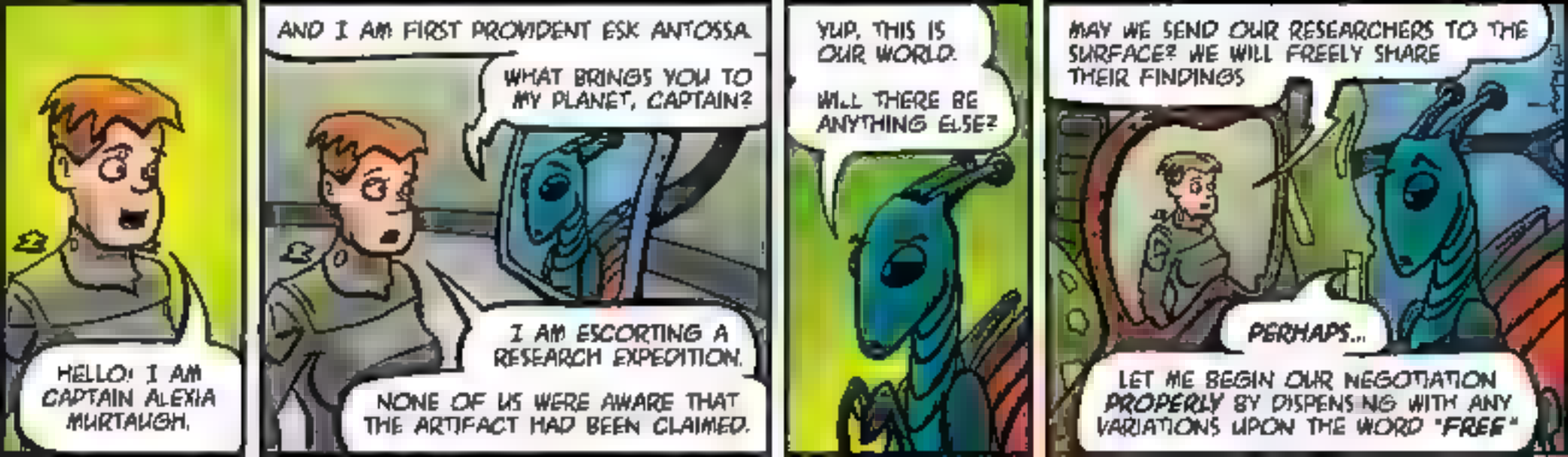


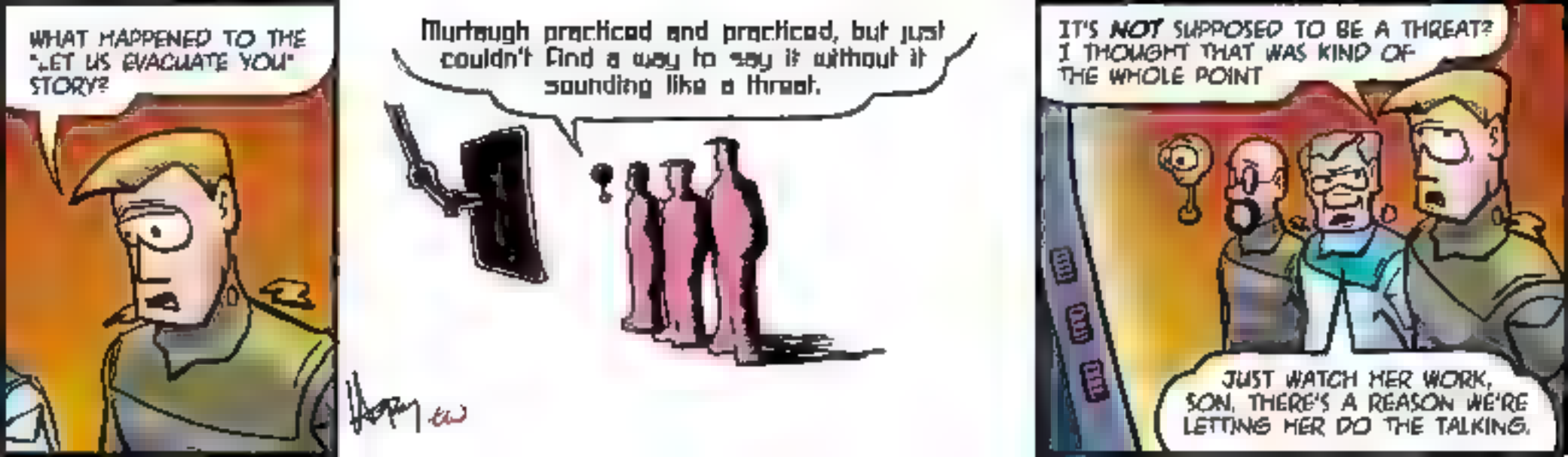
IT'S SMALL. BY ESSPERERIN STANDARDS IN THE MICROGRAVITY OF THE PERERI RING IT WOULD BE SEVERAL TIMES THIS SIZE

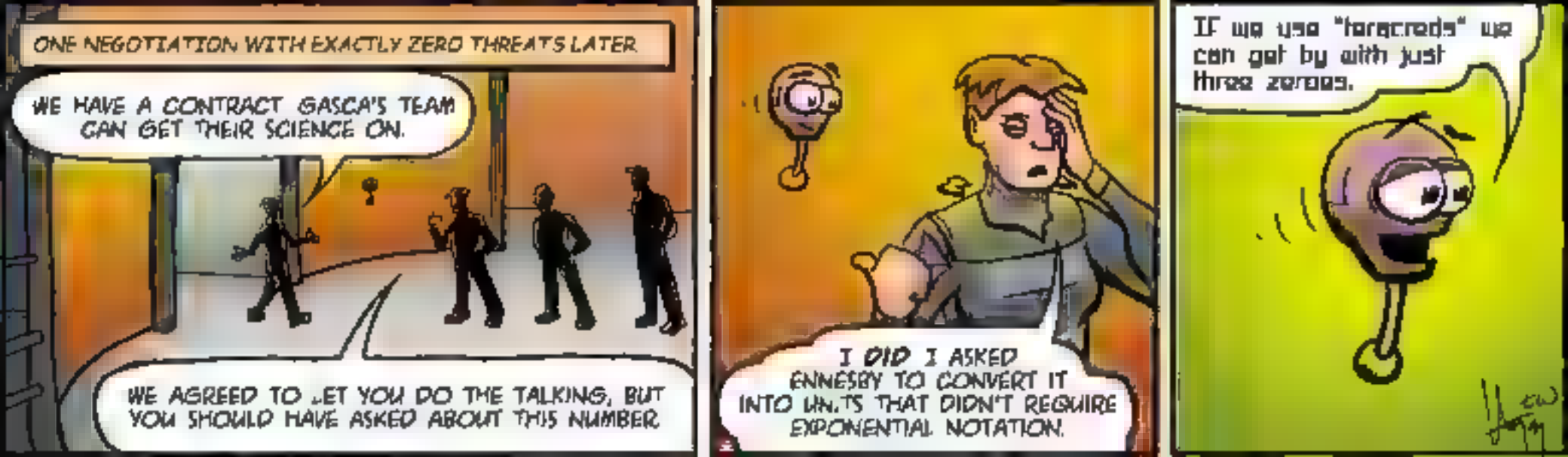
IT IS, HOWEVER, BIG ENOUGH TO FEED THE ENTIRE BESKIN SASHIK CLAN, THANKS TO ITS ACCESS TO RESOURCES UNAVAILABLE IN THE PERIRI RING..

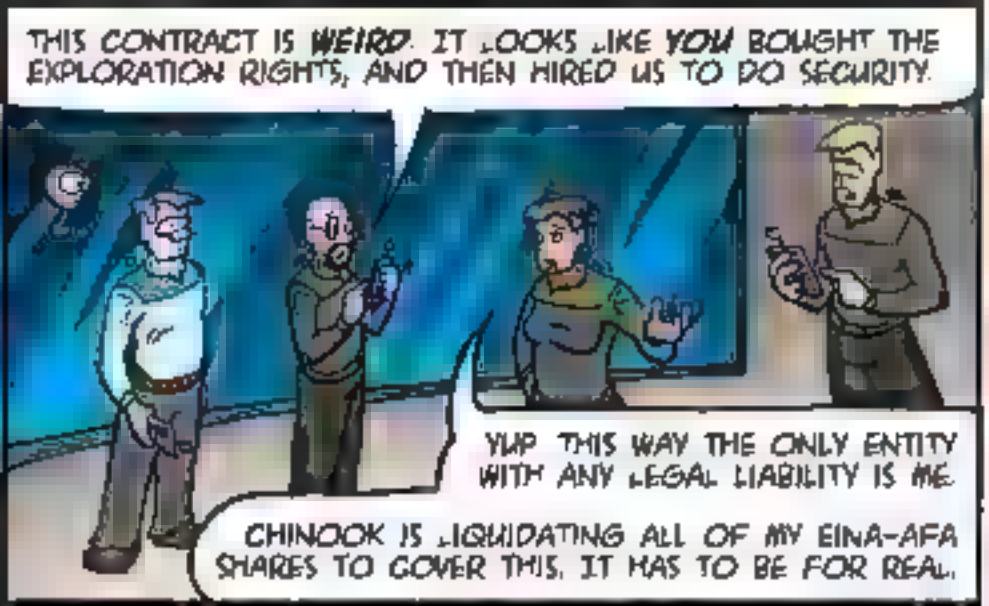



DEEP IN THE ESSPERERIN COLONY CITY OF BESKIN-SASHIK..
TELL ME ABOUT THE MERCENARY COMPANY HOVERING ABOVE US.
THEY ARRIVED IN AN OVER-ENGINEERED CARGO VESSEL WITH A SINGLE CAPITAL SHIP AS ESCORT. THEY DON'T SEEM THREATENING, BUT THIS COMPANY IS WIDELY RUMORED TO HAVE DESTROYED TWO BATTLEPLATES, AND STOLEN THE ENTIRE CITY OF CREDOMAR.
I DON'T WANT RUMORS. I WANT AN ACTUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT
THEIR MARKETING MANAGER WOULD BE A TRULY FORMIDABLE OPPONENT


HELLO! I AM CAPTAIN ALEXIA MURTAUGH.
AND I AM FIRST PROVIDENT ESK ANTOSSA.
WHAT BRINGS YOU TO MY PLANET, CAPTAIN?
I AM ESCORTING A RESEARCH EXPEDITION.
NONE OF US WERE AWARE THAT THE ARTIFACT HAD BEEN CLAIMED.
YUP, THIS IS OUR WORLD.
WILL THERE BE ANYTHING ELSE?
MAY WE SEND OUR RESEARCHERS TO THE SURFACE? WE WILL FREELY SHARE THEIR FINDINGS
PERHAPS...
LET ME BEGIN OUR NEGOTIATION PROPERLY BY DISPENSING WITH ANY VARIATIONS UPON THE WORD "FREE"

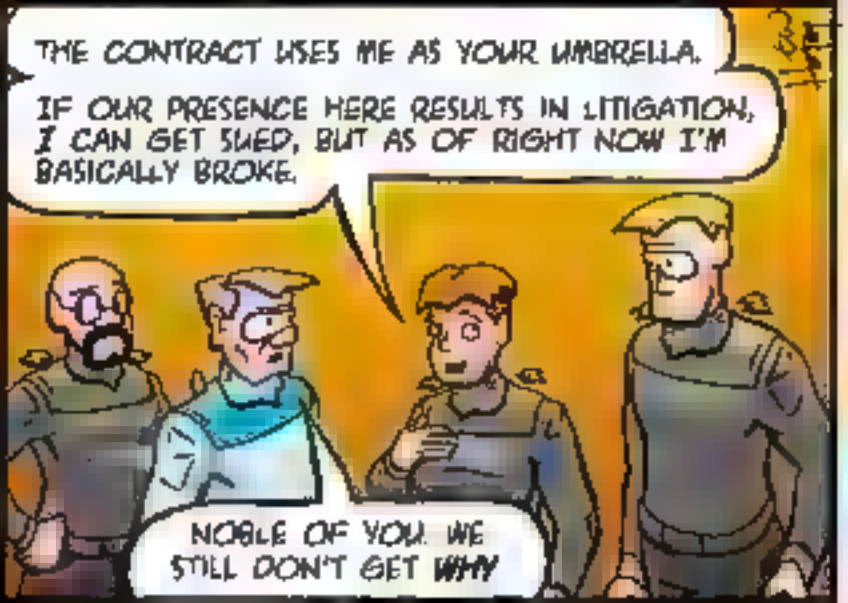

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE "LET US EVACUATE YOU" STORY?
Murtaugh practiced and practiced, but just couldn't find a way to say it without it sounding like a threat.
IT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE A THREAT? I THOUGHT THAT WAS KIND OF THE WHOLE POINT
JUST WATCH HER WORK, SON. THERE'S A REASON WE'RE LETTING HER DO THE TALKING.


ONE NEGOTIATION WITH EXACTLY ZERO THREATS LATER
WE HAVE A CONTRACT. GASCA'S TEAM CAN GET THEIR SCIENCE ON.
WE AGREED TO LET YOU DO THE TALKING, BUT YOU SHOULD HAVE ASKED ABOUT THIS NUMBER.
I DID. I ASKED ENNESBY TO CONVERT IT INTO UNITS THAT DIDN'T REQUIRE EXPONENTIAL NOTATION.
IF WE USE "TERACREDS" WE CAN GET BY WITH JUST THREE ZEROES.


THIS CONTRACT IS WEIRD. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU BOUGHT THE EXPLORATION RIGHTS, AND THEN HIRED US TO DO SECURITY.
YUP. THIS WAY THE ONLY ENTITY WITH ANY LEGAL LIABILITY IS ME.
CHINOOK IS LIQUIDATING ALL OF MY EINA-AFA SHARES TO COVER THIS. IT HAS TO BE FOR REAL.

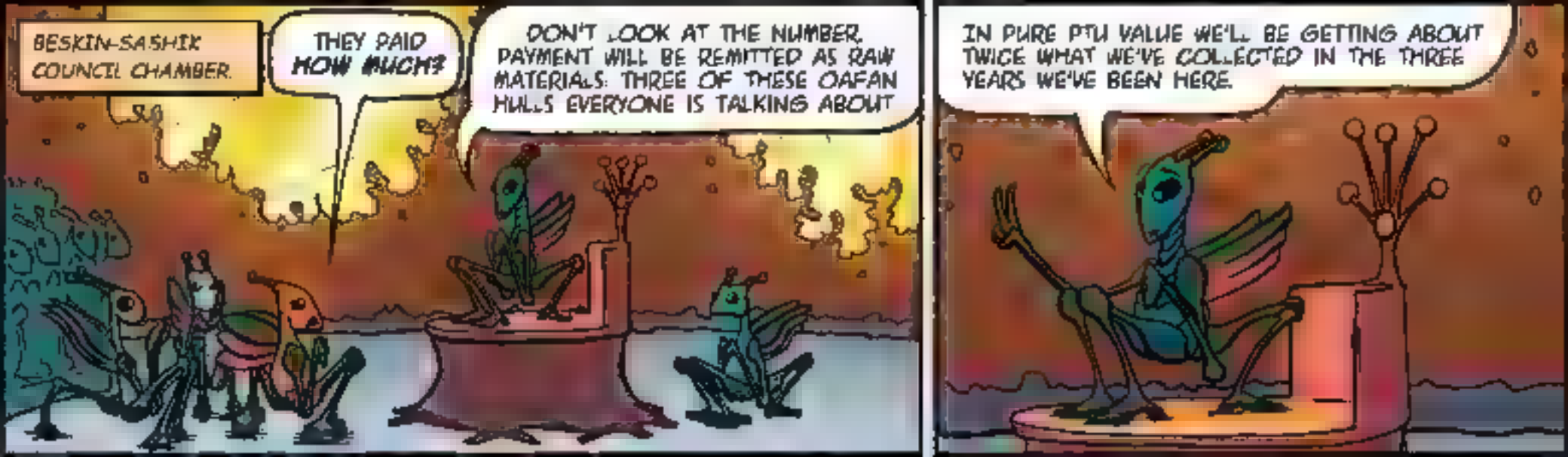
MURTAUGH, WHY?

MAYBE BECAUSE I ALWAYS WANT TO BE ABLE TO SAY "IT'S ONLY MONEY"
WHEN IS THAT A THING HEALTHY PEOPLE WANT TO SAY?

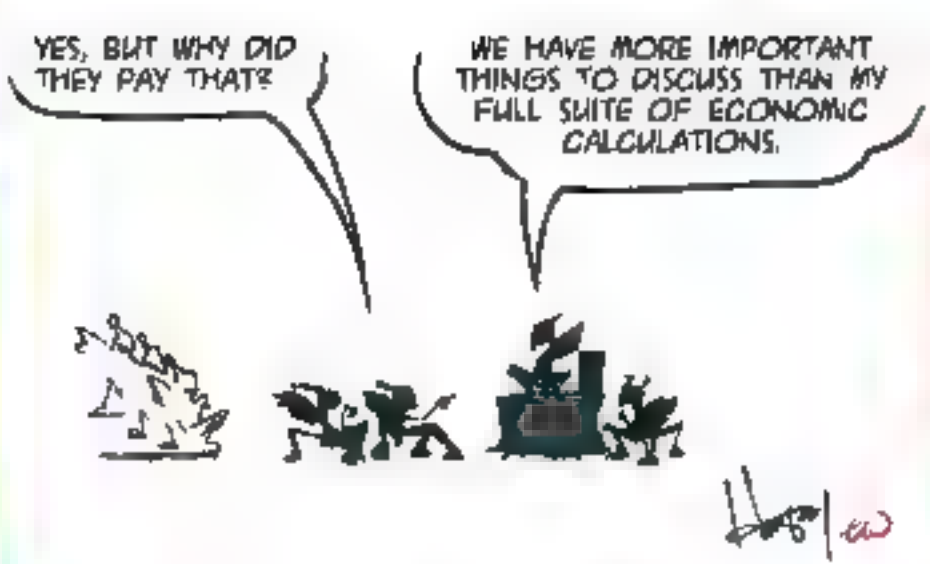

THE CONTRACT USES ME AS YOUR UMBRELLA.
IF OUR PRESENCE HERE RESULTS IN LITIGATION, I CAN GET SUED, BUT AS OF RIGHT NOW I'M BASICALLY BROKE.
NOBLE OF YOU. WE STILL DON'T GET WHY

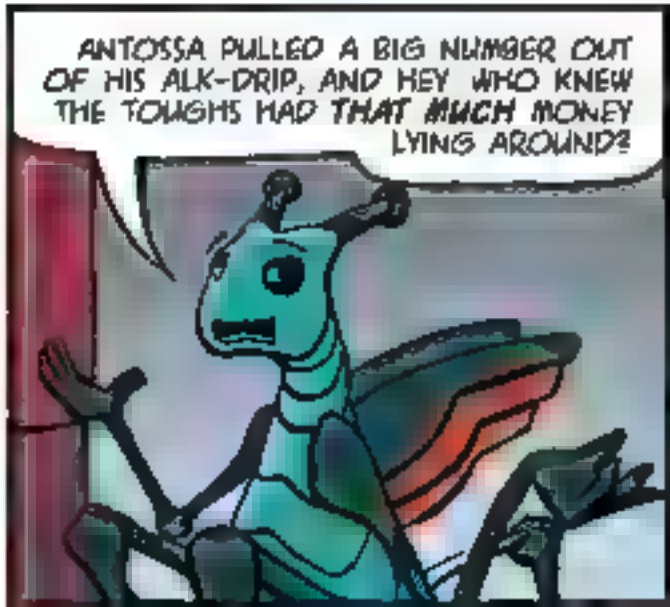
I'M A SOLDIER. THIS IS NO DIFFERENT THAN TAKING A BULLET FOR A BUDDY, OR JUMPING ON A GRENADE.

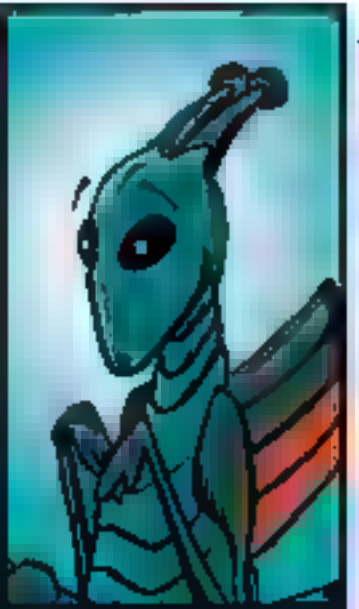
OUR NEW HANDBOOK SPECIFICALLY DISCOURAGES GRENADE-JUMPING.
WELL, PLEASE DON'T FIRE ME. IT TURNS OUT I REALLY NEED THIS JOB.

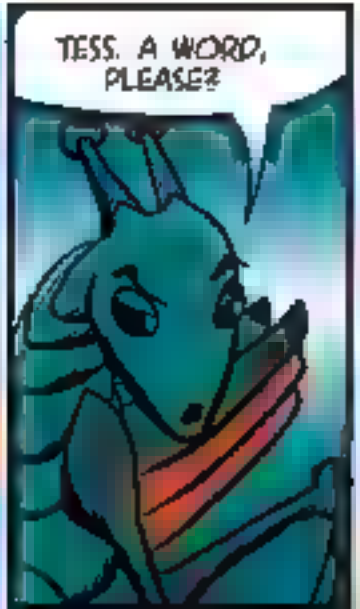

BESKIN-SASHIX COUNCIL CHAMBER.
THEY PAID HOW MUCH?
DON'T LOOK AT THE NUMBER. PAYMENT WILL BE REMITTED AS RAW MATERIALS: THREE OF THESE OAFAN HULLS EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT
IN PURE PTU VALUE WE'LL BE GETTING ABOUT TWICE WHAT WE'VE COLLECTED IN THE THREE YEARS WE'VE BEEN HERE.

IF WE NEED TO FLY, AND THAT TIME HAS PROBABLY COME, THIS WILL KEEP US SOLVENT FOR AT LEAST TWO GENERATIONS.

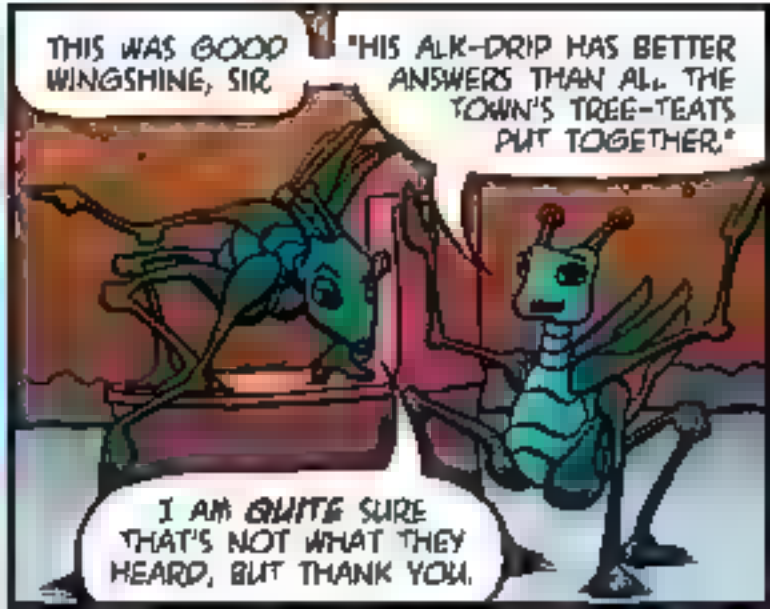

YES, BUT WHY DID THEY PAY THAT?
WE HAVE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DISCUSS THAN MY FULL SUITE OF ECONOMIC CALCULATIONS.

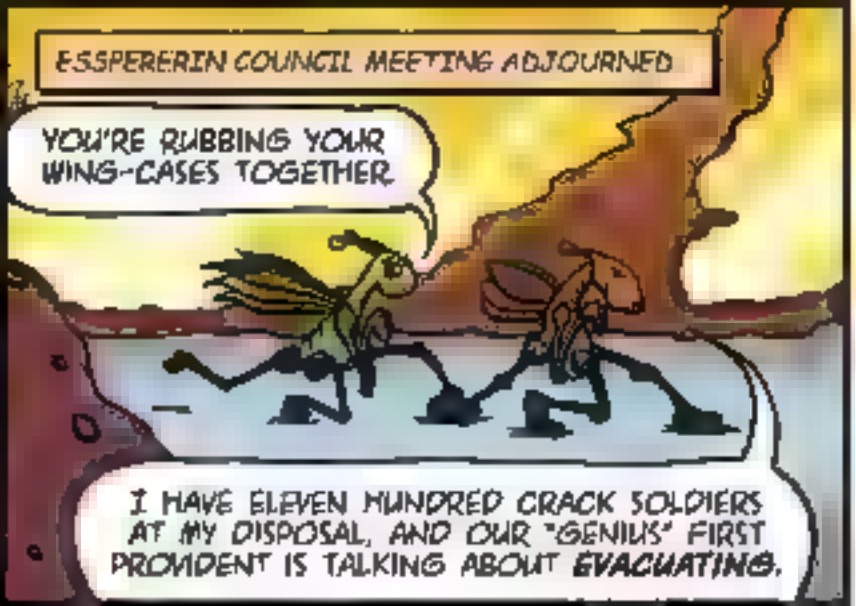

ANTOSSA PULLED A BIG NUMBER OUT OF HIS ALK-DRIP, AND HEY WHO KNEW THE TOUGHS HAD THAT MUCH MONEY LYING AROUND?




TESS. A WORD, PLEASE?

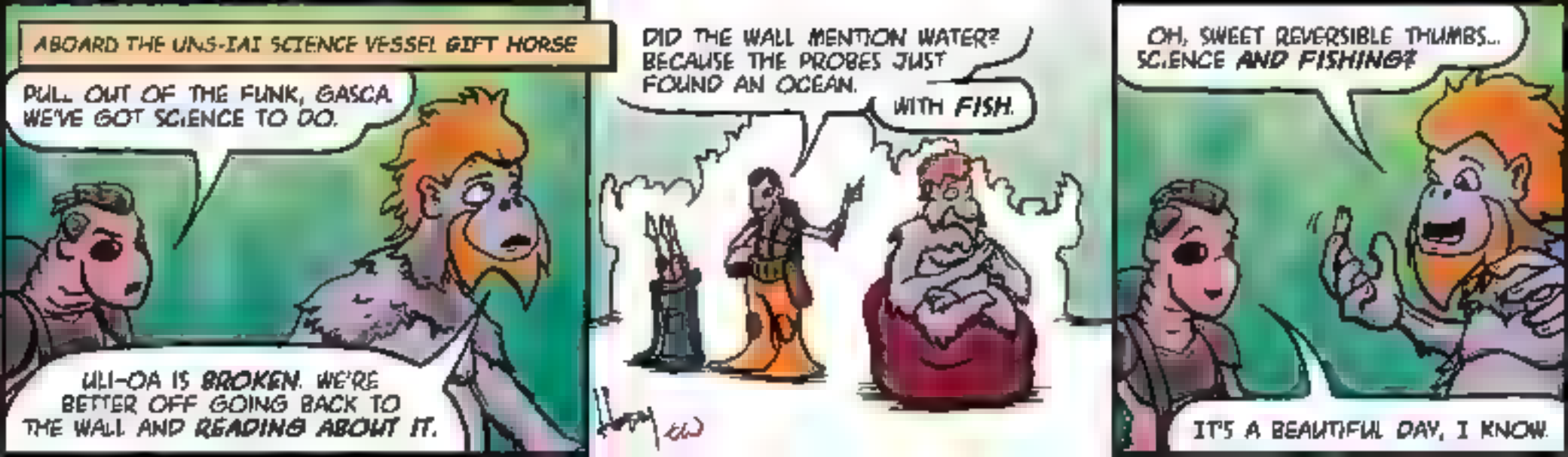
MY JOB IS EASIER IF THEY THINK I'M A GENIUS.


THIS WAS GOOD WINGSHINE, SIR
"HIS ALK-DRIP HAS BETTER ANSWERS THAN ALL THE TOWN'S TREE-TEATS PUT TOGETHER."
I AM QUITE SURE THAT'S NOT WHAT THEY HEARD, BUT THANK YOU.


ESSPERERIN COUNCIL MEETING ADJOURNED
YOU'RE RUBBING YOUR WING-CASES TOGETHER.
I HAVE ELEVEN HUNDRED CRACK SOLDIERS AT MY DISPOSAL, AND OUR "GENIUS" FIRST PROVIDENT IS TALKING ABOUT EVACUATING.

HE IS SMALL-MINDED.
WE CAN SEIZE A LOT MORE THAN JUST WHAT WE CAN CARRY.

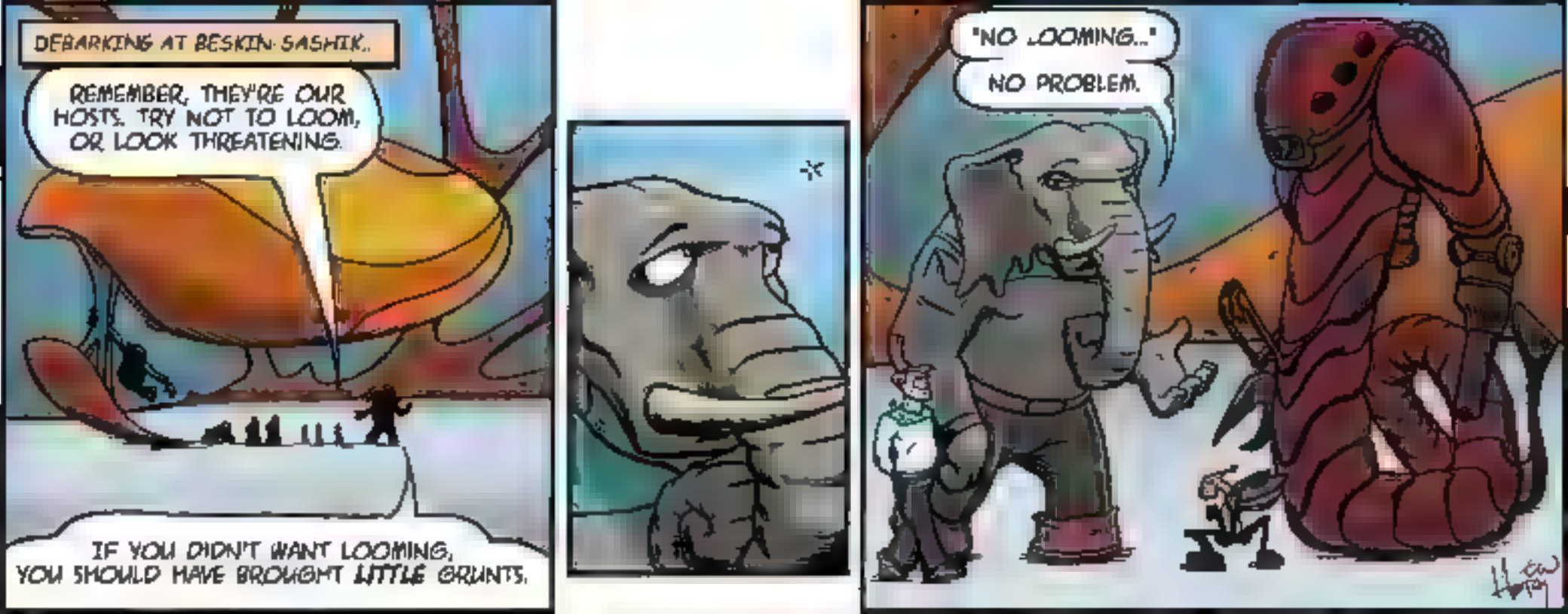
OF COURSE SIR, BUT DO YOU WANT YOUR WING-CASES TELLING THAT TO ANYONE WHO WILL LISTEN?
"SIGH." NO, I DO NOT
GIMME SOME GLUE. WE HAVE PLANS TO MAKE.


ABOARD THE UNS-IAI SCIENCE VESSEL GIFT HORSE
PULL OUT OF THE FUNK, GASCA. WE'VE GOT SCIENCE TO DO.
ULI-OA IS BROKEN. WE'RE BETTER OFF GOING BACK TO THE WALL AND READING ABOUT IT.
DID THE WALL MENTION WATER? BECAUSE THE PROBES JUST FOUND AN OCEAN.
WITH FISH.
OH, SWEET REVERSIBLE THUMBS... SCIENCE AND FISHING?
IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY, I KNOW.

THE MERCENARY WARSHIP BROKEN WIND. BOAT #6.
SIR, I'M NOT AN EXPERT ON THE ESSPERERIN. COMMANDER EBBIRNOTH WOULD BE A BETTER CHOICE FOR THIS TRIP.
EBBY IS STILL UNABLE TO COMMUNICATE. YOU'RE THE BEST WE'VE GOT
SIMPLY SAYING THAT I'M THE BEST YOU'VE GOT DOESN'T MEAN THAT I CAN MAGICALLY B
STOP TRYING TO LOWER MY EXPECTATIONS, AND START PUTTING ON YOUR GAME FACE.

YOU SAID THEY'RE SMALL. HOW SMALL?
THE ESSPERERIN ARE A LITTLE OVER A METER TALL, ON THE AVERAGE.
DO THEY BUILD TO THAT SCALE? ARE WE GOING TO FIT THROUGH THEIR DOORWAYS?
THE COMMODORE'S HONOR GUARD WOULD ALSO LIKE AN ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION.

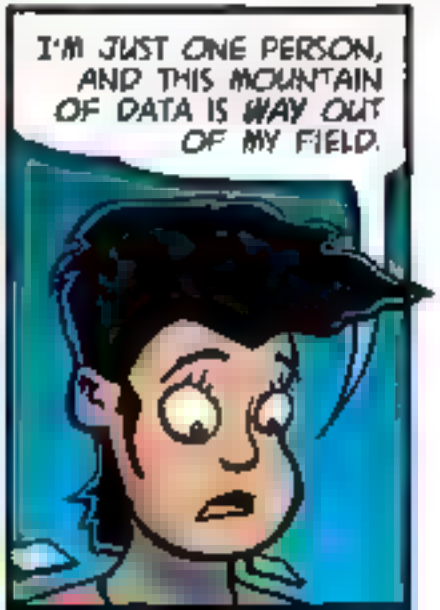
WITH THEIR WINGS STOWED THE ESSPERERIN ARE SMALL, BUT THEIR WINGSPAN IS AROUND FOUR METERS, AND THOSE WINGS WORK. THEIR INDOOR SPACES ARE BUILT TO ACCOMMODATE THAT
THEY CAN FLY!
AND THEY DON'T NEED TO BREATHE.
EVOLUTION REALLY SHAFTED ME.
THAT WAS AN ACCIDENT. THE UPLIFT FOLKS RIPPED ME OFF ON PURPOSE.


DEBARKING AT BESKIN-SASHIK..
REMEMBER, THEY'RE OUR HOSTS. TRY NOT TO LOOM, OR LOOK THREATENING.
IF YOU DIDN'T WANT LOOMING, YOU SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT LITTLE GRUNTS.
"NO LOOMING..."
NO PROBLEM.

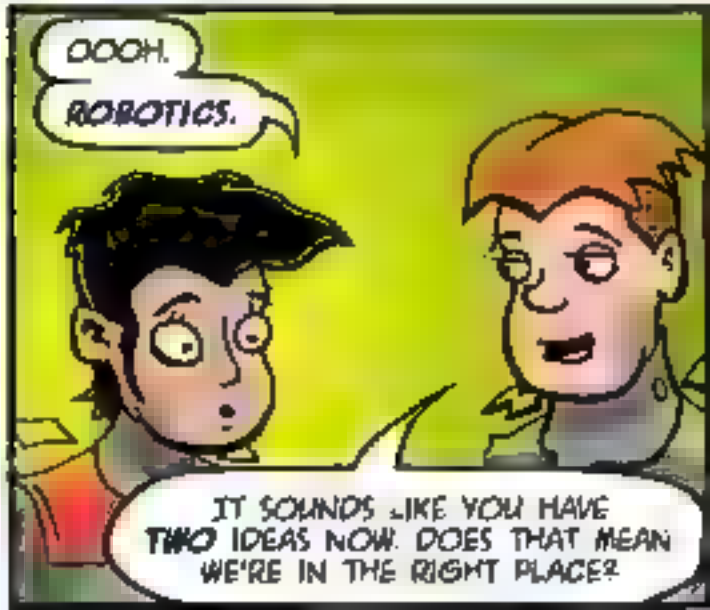
THE ESSPERERIN COLONY CITY BESKIN SASHIK..
NICE. THE TINY ESSPERERIN HAVE MASSIVE MECH SUITS. SHOULD WE EXPECT ADDITIONAL SURPRISES?
I HAVE NO IDEA.
BY DEFINITION, I GUESS THAT MEANS "YES, EXPECT SURPRISES."

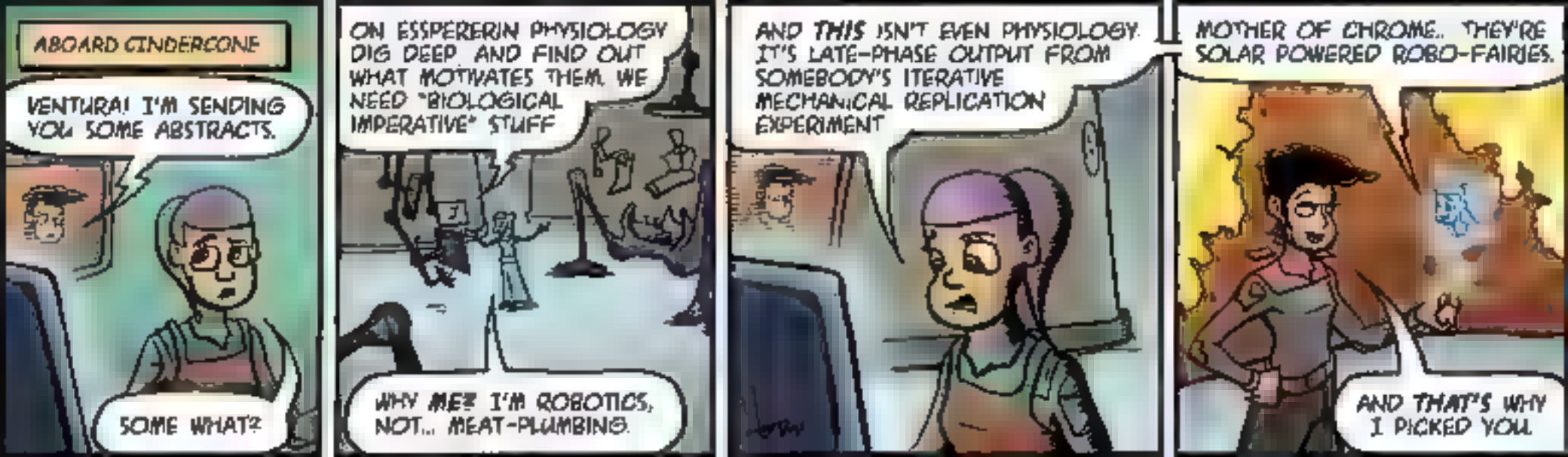
WHICH MEANS YOU DO HAVE ONE IDEA. THAT'S A START
WE REQUIRE MORE. WHERE DO YOU HAVE TO BE IN ORDER TO GET THEM?
WHICH "THEM?"
IDEAS.
DID YOU REALLY JUST ASK ME "WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?
YES, BECAUSE YOU'RE AN ANALYST, NOT AN ARTIST

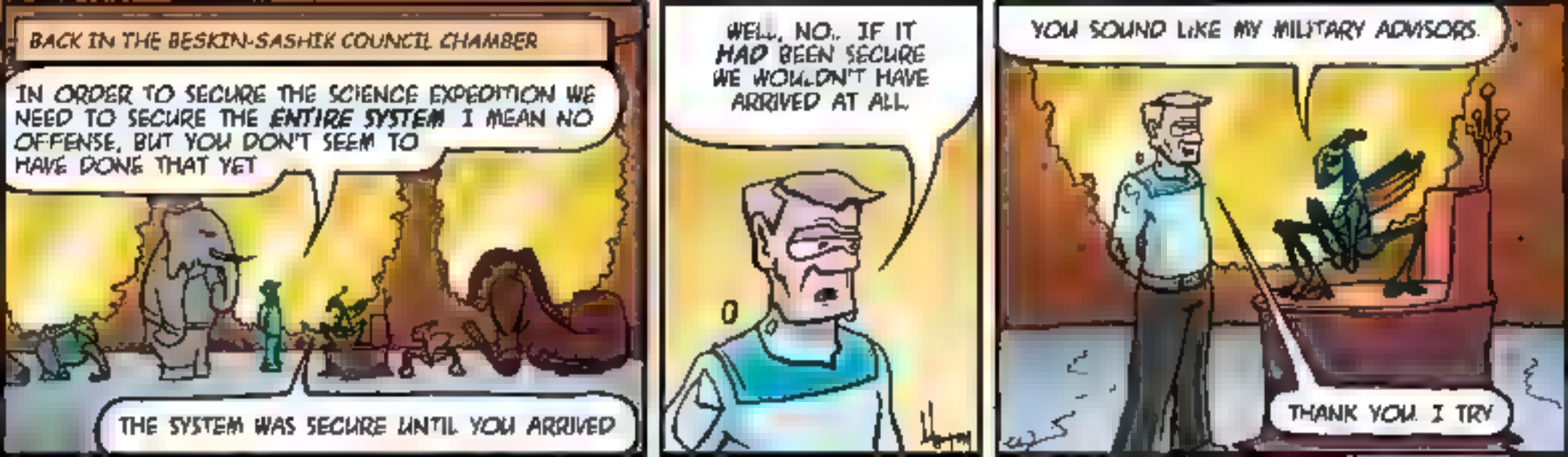
I'M AN ANALYST, NOT AN INTELLIGENCE AGENCY.

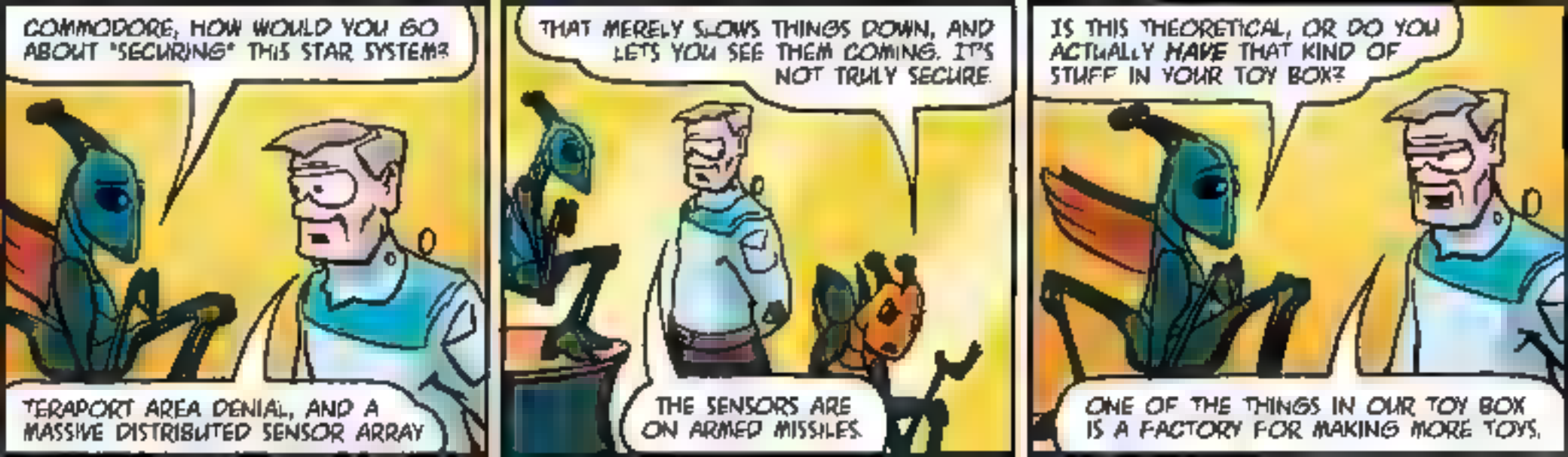

I'M JUST ONE PERSON, AND THIS MOUNTAIN OF DATA IS WAY OUT OF MY FIELD.

ESSPERERIN PHYSIOLOGY ABSTRACTS READ LIKE...
LIKE SCHEMATICS FOR ESOTERIC ROBOTICS PROJECTS.


OOOH.
ROBOTICS.
IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAVE TWO IDEAS NOW. DOES THAT MEAN WE'RE IN THE RIGHT PLACE?

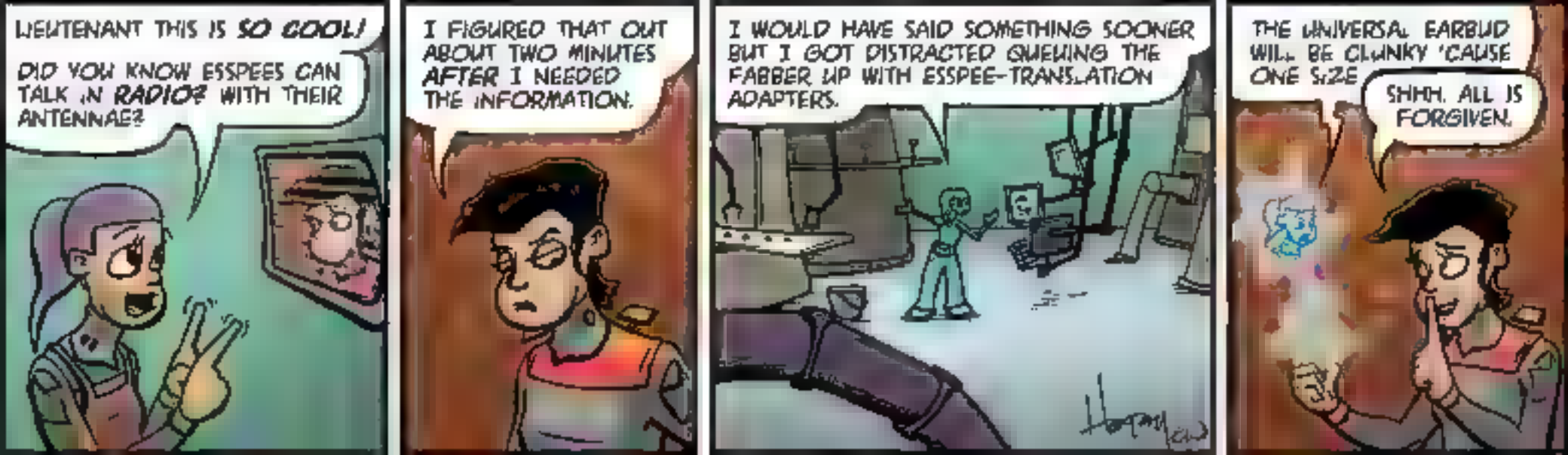

ABOARD CINDERCONE
VENTURA! I'M SENDING YOU SOME ABSTRACTS.
SOME WHAT?
ON ESSPERERIN PHYSIOLOGY DIG DEEP AND FIND OUT WHAT MOTIVATES THEM. WE NEED "BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE" STUFF
WHY ME? I'M ROBOTICS, NOT... MEAT-PLUMBING.
AND THIS ISN'T EVEN PHYSIOLOGY. IT'S LATE-PHASE OUTPUT FROM SOMEBODY'S ITERATIVE MECHANICAL REPLICATION EXPERIMENT
MOTHER OF CHROME.. THEY'RE SOLAR POWERED ROBO-FAIRIES.
AND THAT'S WHY I PICKED YOU.


BACK IN THE BESKIN-SASHIK COUNCIL CHAMBER
IN ORDER TO SECURE THE SCIENCE EXPEDITION WE NEED TO SECURE THE ENTIRE SYSTEM I MEAN NO OFFENSE, BUT YOU DON'T SEEM TO HAVE DONE THAT YET
THE SYSTEM WAS SECURE UNTIL YOU ARRIVED
WELL, NO. IF IT HAD BEEN SECURE WE WOULDN'T HAVE ARRIVED AT ALL
YOU SOUND LIKE MY MILITARY ADVISORS.
THANK YOU. I TRY


COMMODORE, HOW WOULD YOU GO ABOUT "SECURING" THIS STAR SYSTEM?
TERAPORT AREA DENIAL, AND A MASSIVE DISTRIBUTED SENSOR ARRAY
THAT MERELY SLOWS THINGS DOWN, AND LETS YOU SEE THEM COMING. IT'S NOT TRULY SECURE.
THE SENSORS ARE ON ARMED MISSILES.
IS THIS THEORETICAL, OR DO YOU ACTUALLY HAVE THAT KIND OF STUFF IN YOUR TOY BOX?
ONE OF THE THINGS IN OUR TOY BOX IS A FACTORY FOR MAKING MORE TOYS.

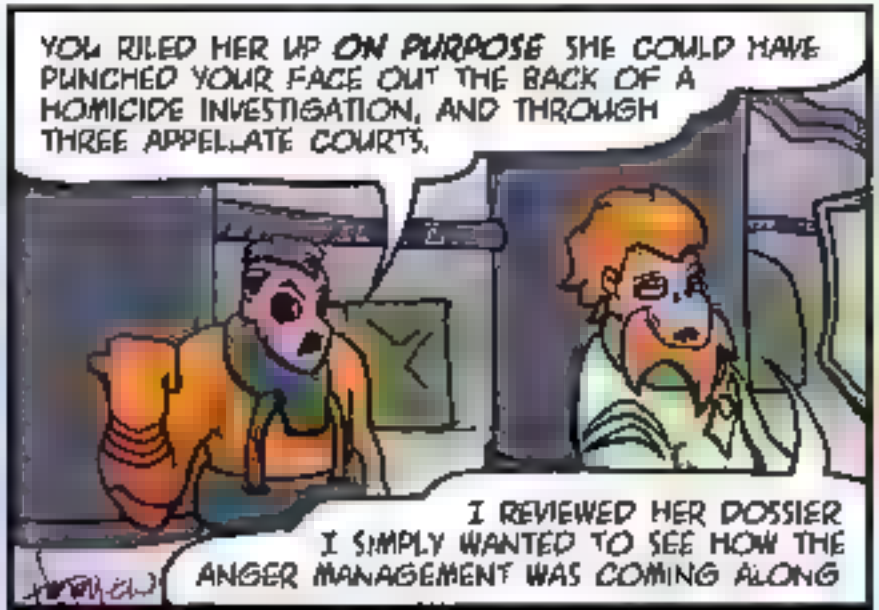
ESSPERERIN VACUUM-SPEAK
Your opinion, Wing Marshal?
I will feel much safer once they've deployed their missiles across the system.
Those missiles are ship-killers. Do we want them hanging over our heads?
Once they've been deployed they'll hang a lot further from our heads than they are right now.
DEPLOY AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE PLEASE; WE WANT TO BE SAFE.

I MISSED SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT BACK THERE. WHAT WAS IT?
RADIO, I THINK.
THE ESSPERERIN CAN LIVE INDEFINITELY IN AIRLESS SPACE. THEY MUST HAVE EVOLVED A WAY TO TALK IN THAT ENVIRONMENT
THE NEXT TIME ANY OF US MEET WITH THEM WE WILL HAVE THE ABILITY TO LISTEN IN WHEN THEY SPEAK THAT WAY
YOU WANT IT DECRYPTED AND TRANSLATED REAL-TIME?
DON'T MAKE IT SOUND DIFFICULT. MAKE IT SOUND LIKE YOU'RE SOLVING THE PROBLEM.

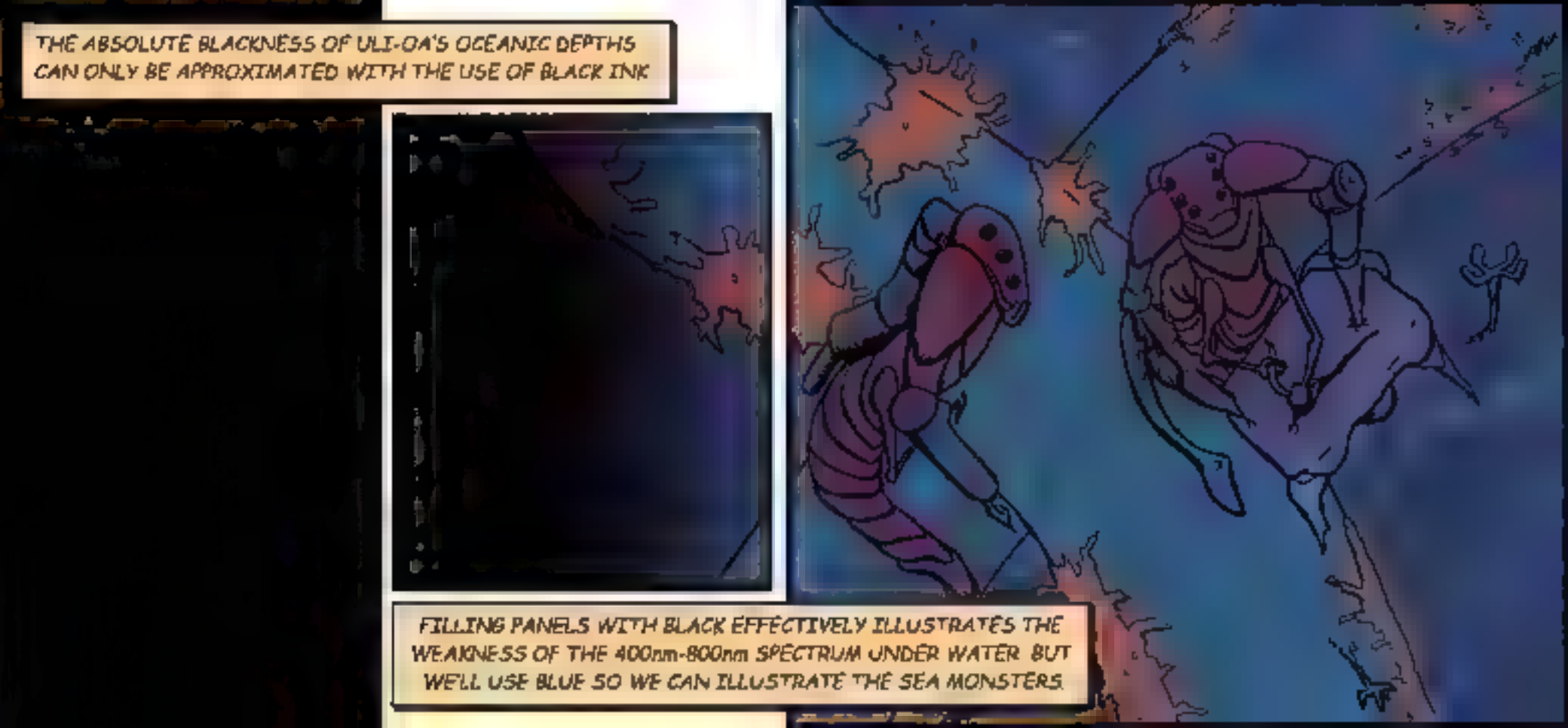

LIEUTENANT THIS IS SO COOL!
DID YOU KNOW ESSPEES CAN TALK IN RADIO? WITH THEIR ANTENNAE?
I FIGURED THAT OUT ABOUT TWO MINUTES AFTER I NEEDED THE INFORMATION.
I WOULD HAVE SAID SOMETHING SOONER BUT I GOT DISTRACTED QUEUING THE FABBER UP WITH ESSPEE-TRANSLATION ADAPTERS.
THE UNIVERSAL EARBUD WILL BE CLUNKY 'CAUSE ONE SIZE
SHHH. ALL IS FORGIVEN.

GIFT HORSE RESEARCH POD ONE TWENTY KILOMETERS DOWN IN THE TANGLE OF ULI-OA.
YOU SAID THEY WERE DURABLE.
THEY ARE. WHAT DID YOU DO?
SCIENCE.
MY BOYFRIEND USES THAT WORD TO APOLOGIZE WHEN HE'S PUTTING OUT A FIRE IN THE LAB
SO YOU OBVIOUSLY DID SOMETHING.
"SOMETHING?" YOUNG LADY, THE EGREGIOUS DESIGN FLAWS OF THESE CRYPT SPIDERS ARE YOUR FAULT, NOT MINE.

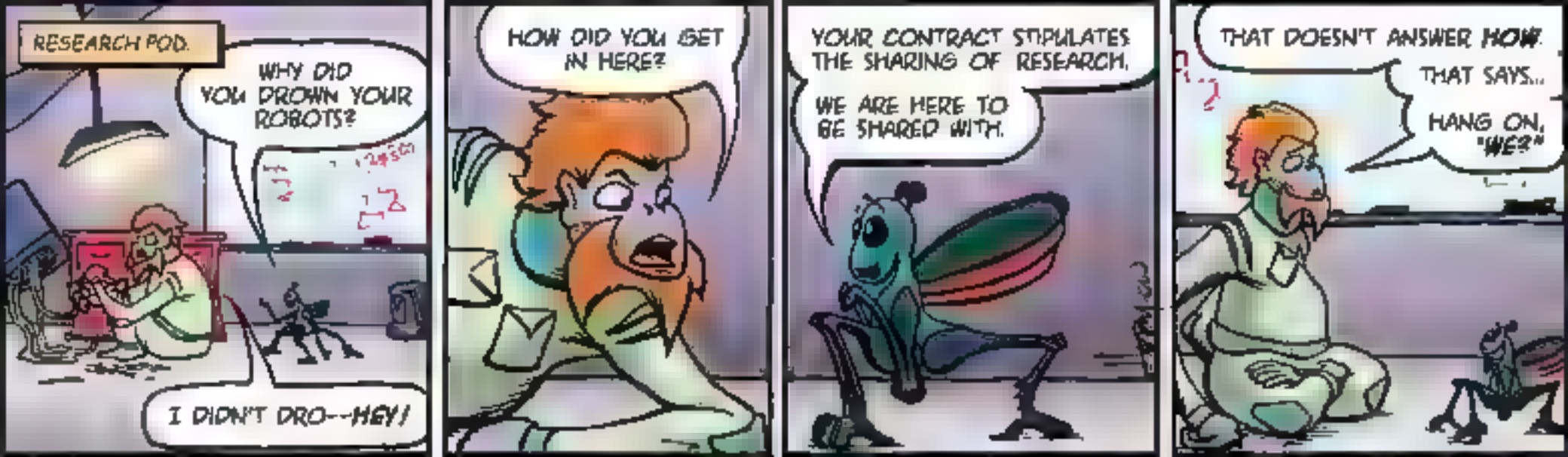
WRECKAGE AND TELEMETRY. JUST GIVE ME THOSE, AND I'LL GO.
THE WRECKAGE SANK, AND WHEN WE SENT ANOTHER PAIR OF CRYPT SPIDERS AFTER THEM, THEY SANK TOO.
JUST TELEMETRY THEN.
AND DON'T THROW ANY MORE OF MY TOYS INTO THE WATER UNTIL I FIGURE OUT WHY THEY CAN'T SWIM.


YOU RILED HER UP ON PURPOSE SHE COULD HAVE PUNCHED YOUR FACE OUT THE BACK OF A HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION, AND THROUGH THREE APPELLATE COURTS.
I REVIEWED HER DOSSIER I SIMPLY WANTED TO SEE HOW THE ANGER MANAGEMENT WAS COMING ALONG

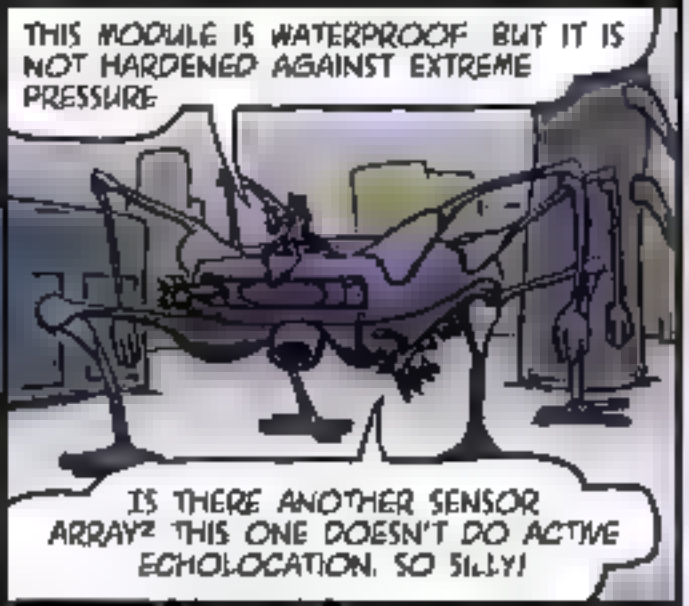
SO, "SCIENCE."
IT'S A STERILE WORD, YES, BUT SOME DAYS IT'S ALL I HAVE.

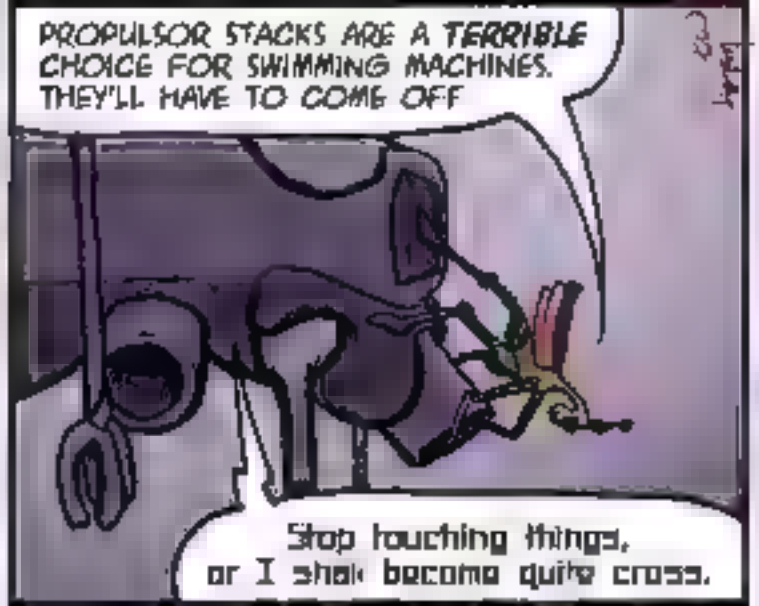

THE ABSOLUTE BLACKNESS OF ULI-OA'S OCEANIC DEPTHS CAN ONLY BE APPROXIMATED WITH THE USE OF BLACK INK
FILLING PANELS WITH BLACK EFFECTIVELY ILLUSTRATES THE WEAKNESS OF THE 400nm-800nm SPECTRUM UNDER WATER. BUT WE'LL USE BLUE SO WE CAN ILLUSTRATE THE SEA MONSTERS.

IT WAS CONTROLLED VIA HYPERNODE BY AN A.I. IN ORBIT
WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SUBORN THESE CRAWLERS UNDETECTED.
WHAT IF WE LOOP THE SENSOR FEEDS A
STOP
THAT DOES NOT WORK.
BUT IF WE RANDOMIZE TH
STOP.
THAT ISN'T EVEN A THING, EXCEPT IN CHILDRENS' SHOWS.
THEN THERE'S GOT TO BE SOME TRUTH TO
IN WHICH THEY TEACH CHILDREN THAT IT DOES NOT WORK.


RESEARCH POD.
WHY DID YOU DROWN YOUR ROBOTS?
I DIDN'T DRO--HEY!
HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE?
YOUR CONTRACT STIPULATES THE SHARING OF RESEARCH.
WE ARE HERE TO BE SHARED WITH.
THAT DOESN'T ANSWER HOW.
THAT SAYS...
HANG ON, "WE?"

NOBODY HAS DOCKED HERE SINCE COMMANDER FOXWORTHY LEFT
THE ESSPERERIN DON'T NEED AIR. THEY COULD HAVE JUST... SCURRIED ACROSS A HUNDRED KLICKS OF VACUUM AND LET THEMSELVES IN.
"LET THEMSELVES IN." THROUGH OUR AIRLOCK?
OF COURSE! AIRLOCKS ARE FOR LOCKING AIR IN, AND LOCKING UNINVITED GUESTS OUT
WE WERE VERY INVITED, BUT THE LOCK WOULDN'T OPEN, SO I FIXED IT
SECURITY AND FACILITIES ARE GOING TO FIGHT ABOUT THIS ONE.


THIS MODULE IS WATERPROOF BUT IT IS NOT HARDENED AGAINST EXTREME PRESSURE
IS THERE ANOTHER SENSOR ARRAY? THIS ONE DOESN'T DO ACTIVE ECHOLOCATION. SO SILLY!


PROPULSOR STACKS ARE A TERRIBLE CHOICE FOR SWIMMING MACHINES. THEY'LL HAVE TO COME OFF
Stop touching things, or I shall become quite cross.

IT HAS A PILOT! IS SHE VERY TINY?
I HOPE SHE DOES NOT MIND DROWNING.

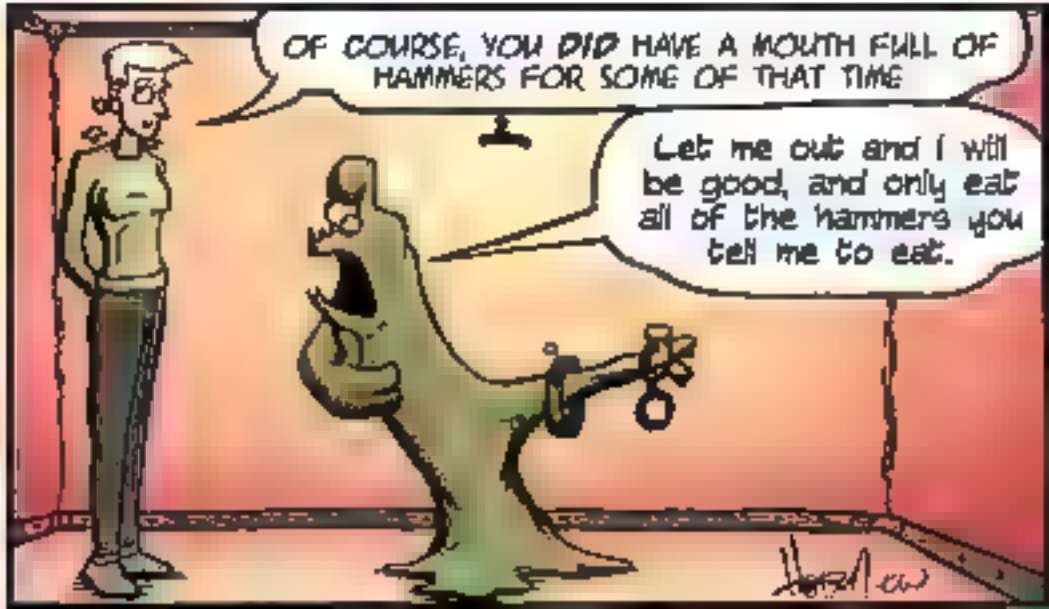
I am not a pilot. I am the Goddess of Earth, Wind, and Plumbing.
All of the crypt spiders are mine. You do not have my permission to modify them.
WE'VE SEEN HOLOGRAMS BEFORE
DOES THAT GODDESS THING ACTUALLY WORK ON PEOPLE?
... you ask while sitting submissively and listening.

SANCTUM ADROIT PRECINCTORY DETENTION. JUMPSTAR PRIME
I was dead once.
That's not how it really goes, but it's fun to say it that way.
Except it's not fun. It felt like I lost five days, but what really happened was I lost a forever.
Petey had all my "me" in a fridge somewhere, and when I died, Petey made another me.

When *he* died, I'm not him. Petey could have made a me without the first me being dead, and then there would be two of me doing all the things, but here I am and there is only one and that means I lost a Forever.

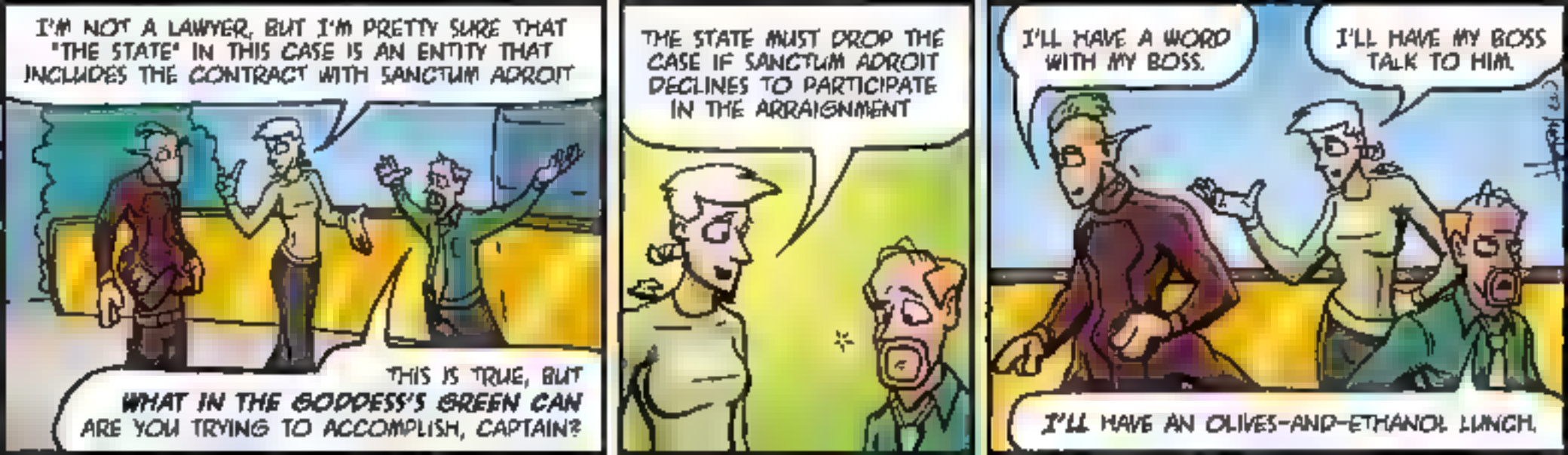
And that means Ebby lost a Forever, and Murtaugh lost a Forever, and Kevin lost like, *five* Forevers, and you *have to get me out of here I hate being alone.*

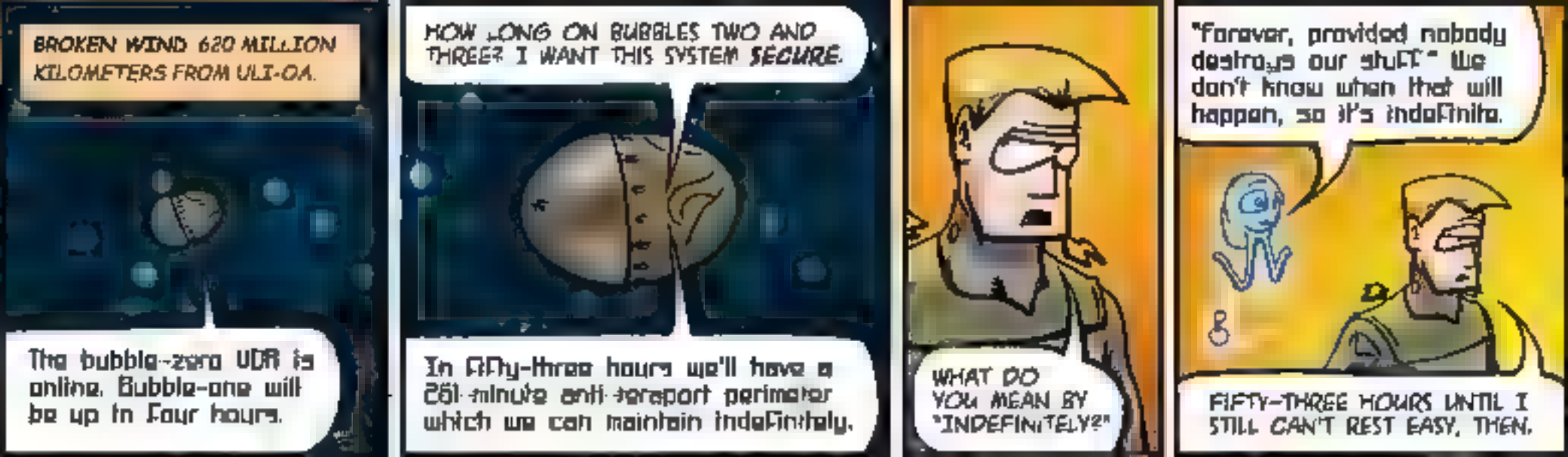
YOU'VE SAID MORE IN THE LAST FIVE MINUTES THAN YOU SAID IN ALL THE TIME WE SPENT TOGETHER ON EARTH.


OF COURSE, YOU DID HAVE A MOUTH FULL OF HAMMERS FOR SOME OF THAT TIME
Let me out and I will be good, and only eat all of the hammers you tell me to eat.

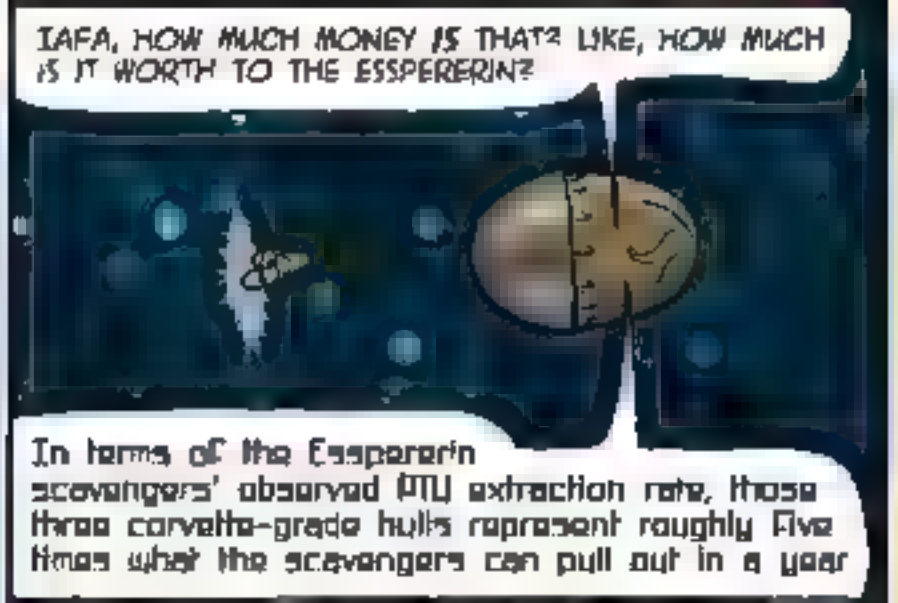
THIS INTERVIEW WILL NOT BE ADMISSIBLE FOR ARRAIGNMENT UNLESS THE ACCUSED KNOWS WE'RE LISTENING.
HE CAN HEAR US?
HE CAN HEAR OUR HEARTBEATS.
I can hear what you had for lunch.

'SCUSE ME, CHIEF JUSTICE? AM I ALLOWED TO CHANGE MY MIND?
ALWAYS. WHAT'S THE REAL QUESTION?
AFTER LISTENING TO THAT SAD LITTLE AMORPH, I DON'T THINK I WANT TO PRESS CHARGES. HE'S HURTING. HE NEEDS HELP
I'M SORRY. AT THIS POINT THE MATTER IS OUT OF ALL FOUR OF YOUR HANDS.
ASSAULTING A LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER IS A CRIME AGAINST THE STATE, NOT AGAINST YOU AS AN INDIVIDUAL
I DON'T THINK YOU WANT ME TO FEEL THE WAY I FEEL WHEN YOU SAY THAT
I DON'T THINK YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW LITTLE THE LAW CARES HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT IT

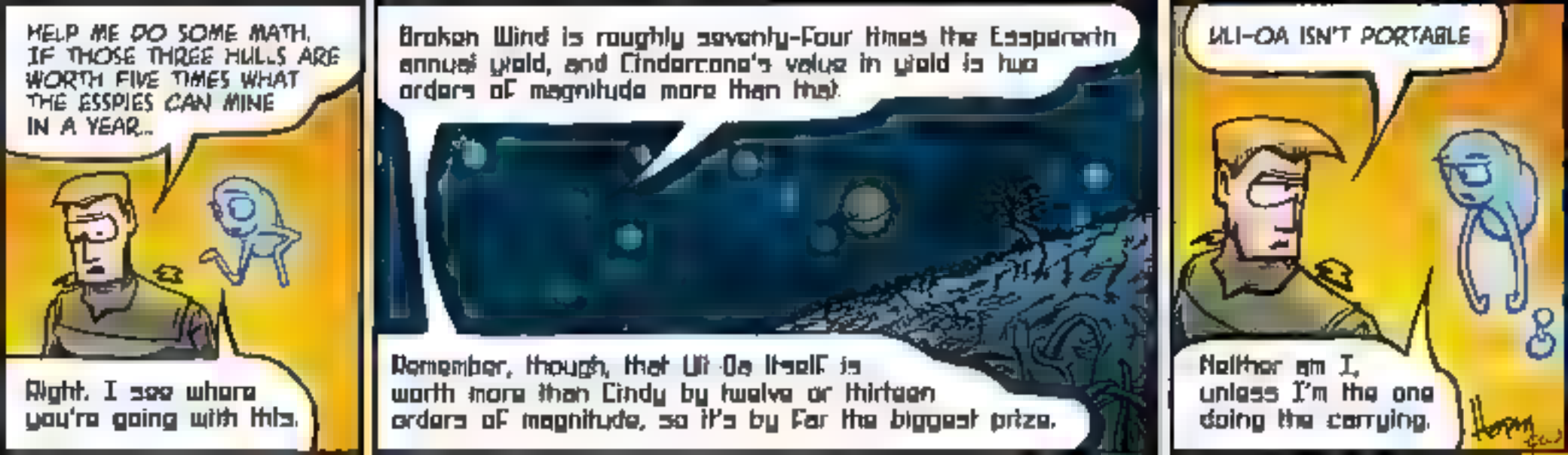

I'M NOT A LAWYER, BUT I'M PRETTY SURE THAT "THE STATE" IN THIS CASE IS AN ENTITY THAT INCLUDES THE CONTRACT WITH SANCTUM ADROIT
THIS IS TRUE, BUT WHAT IN THE GODDESS'S GREEN CAN ARE YOU TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH, CAPTAIN?
THE STATE MUST DROP THE CASE IF SANCTUM ADROIT DECLINES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ARRAIGNMENT
I'LL HAVE A WORD WITH MY BOSS.
I'LL HAVE MY BOSS TALK TO HIM.
I'LL HAVE AN OLIVES-AND-ETHANOL LUNCH.

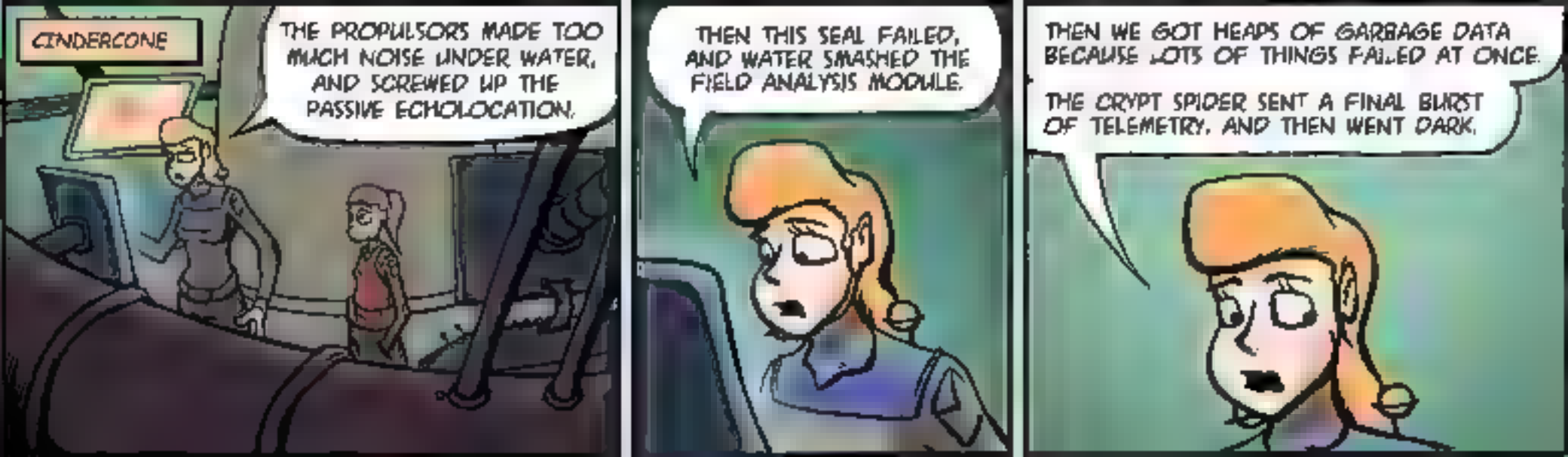

BROKEN WIND 620 MILLION KILOMETERS FROM ULI-OA.
The bubble-zero UDR is online. Bubble-one will be up in four hours.
HOW LONG ON BUBBLES TWO AND THREE? I WANT THIS SYSTEM SECURE.
In fifty-three hours we'll have a 261-minute anti-teraport perimeter which we can maintain indefinitely.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "INDEFINITELY?"
"Forever, provided nobody destroys our stuff." We don't know when that will happen, so it's indefinite.
FIFTY-THREE HOURS UNTIL I STILL CAN'T REST EASY, THEN.

Authenticated Teraport inbound...
Murtaugh's payment is here now.


IAFA, HOW MUCH MONEY IS THAT? LIKE, HOW MUCH IS IT WORTH TO THE ESSPERERIN?
In terms of the Esspererin scavengers' observed PTU extraction rate, those three corvette-grade hulks represent roughly five times what the scavengers can pull out in a year

I DON'T THINK THEY WANT US TO CALL THEM SCAVENGERS.
Should I learn that they took Uli-Da by force I will cheerfully upgrade them to "pillagers."

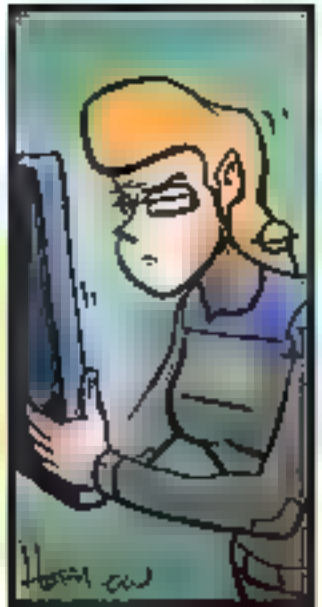

HELP ME DO SOME MATH. IF THOSE THREE HULLS ARE WORTH FIVE TIMES WHAT THE ESSPIES CAN MINE IN A YEAR...
Right. I see where you're going with this.
Broken Wind is roughly seventy-four times the Esspareth annual yield, and Cindarcona's value in yield is two orders of magnitude more than that.
Remember, though, that Ul-Qa itself is worth more than Cindy by twelve or thirteen orders of magnitude, so it's by far the biggest prize.
ULI-QA ISN'T PORTABLE
Neither am I, unless I'm the one doing the carrying.


CINDERCONE
THE PROPULSORS MADE TOO MUCH NOISE UNDER WATER, AND SCREWED UP THE PASSIVE ECHOLOCATION.
THEN THIS SEAL FAILED, AND WATER SMASHED THE FIELD ANALYSIS MODULE.
THEN WE GOT HEAPS OF GARBAGE DATA BECAUSE LOTS OF THINGS FAILED AT ONCE.
THE CRYPT SPIDER SENT A FINAL BURST OF TELEMETRY, AND THEN WENT DARK.

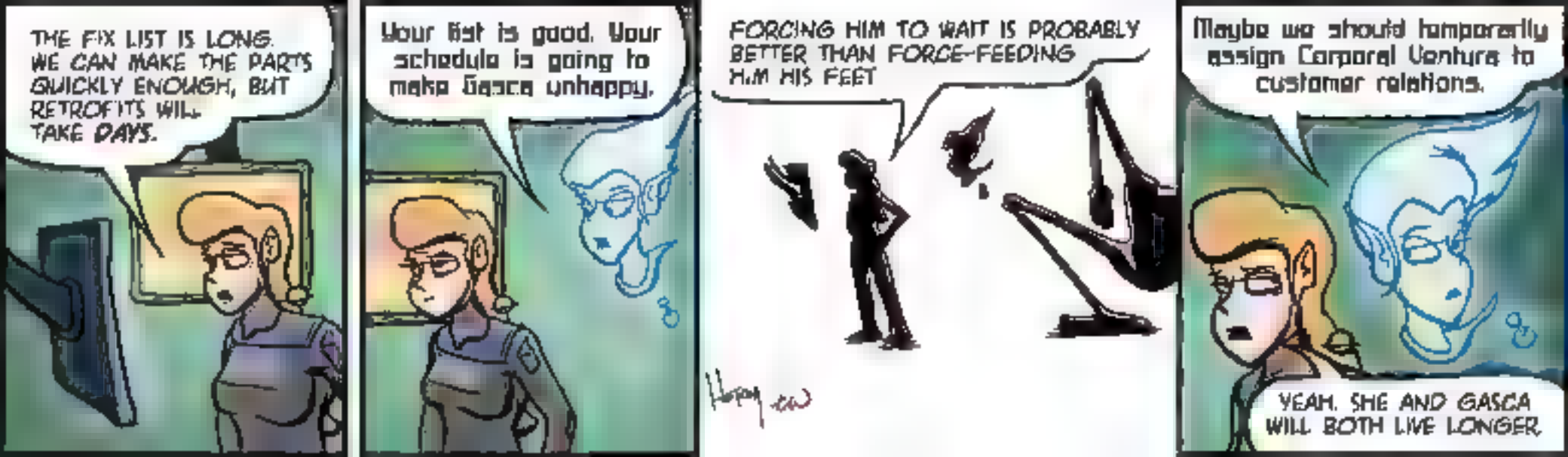
AS IT SANK INTO THE ABYSSSSS...

I'M NOT IN THE MOOD FOR JOKEY STUFF.

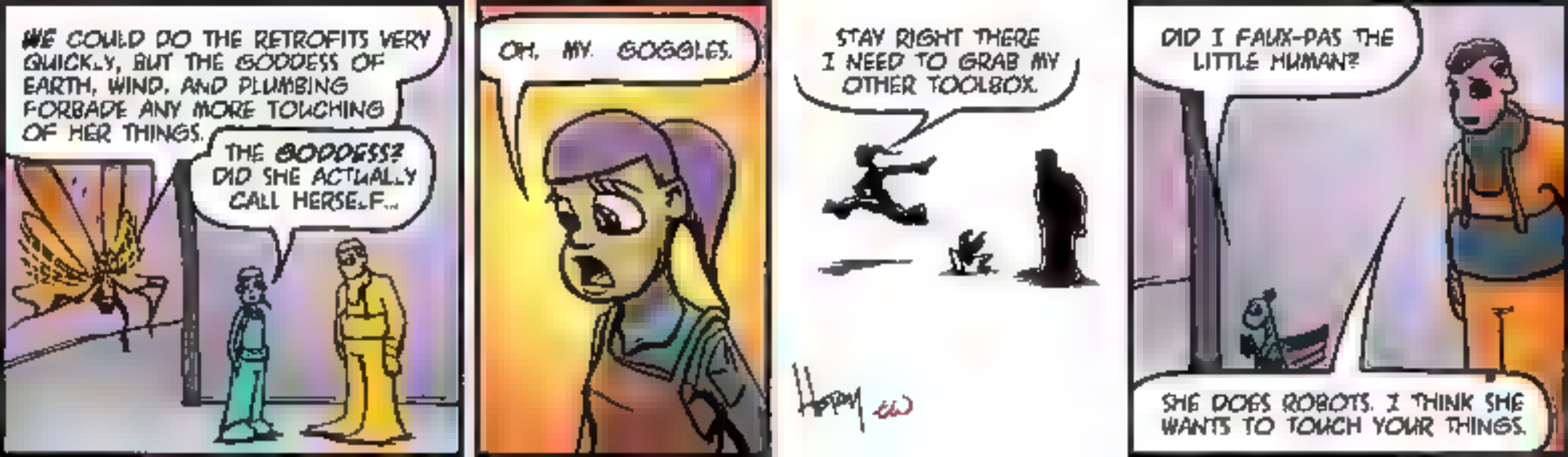
I KNOW THE JOKEY STUFF IS FOR LIGHTENING THE MOOD SO YOU CAN SHAKE IT OFF AND FIX ALL THE

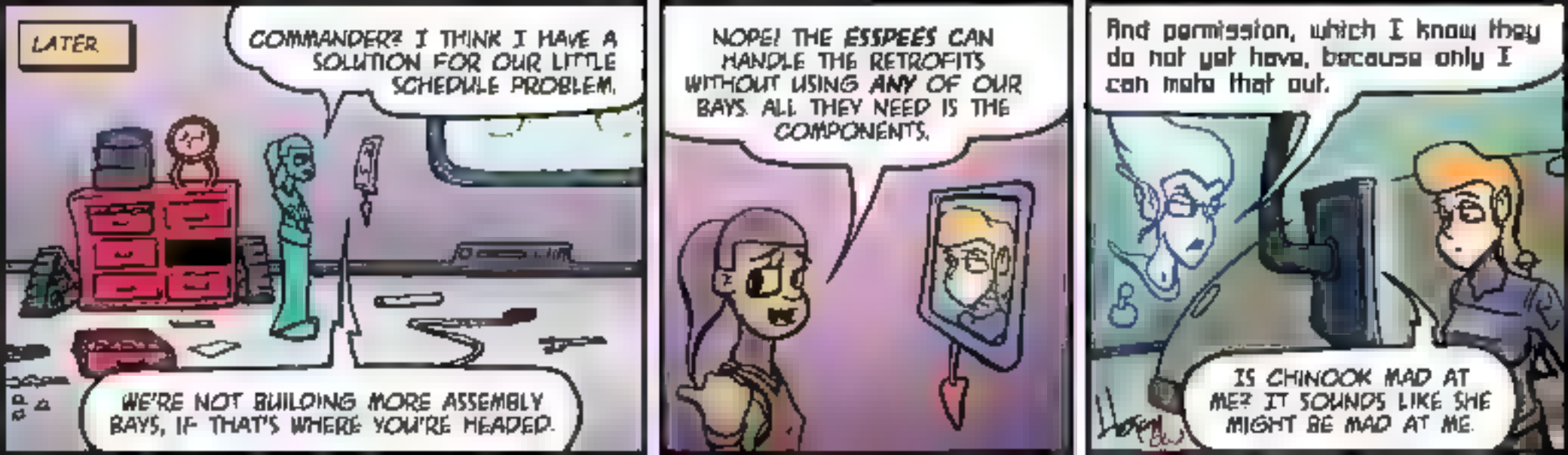


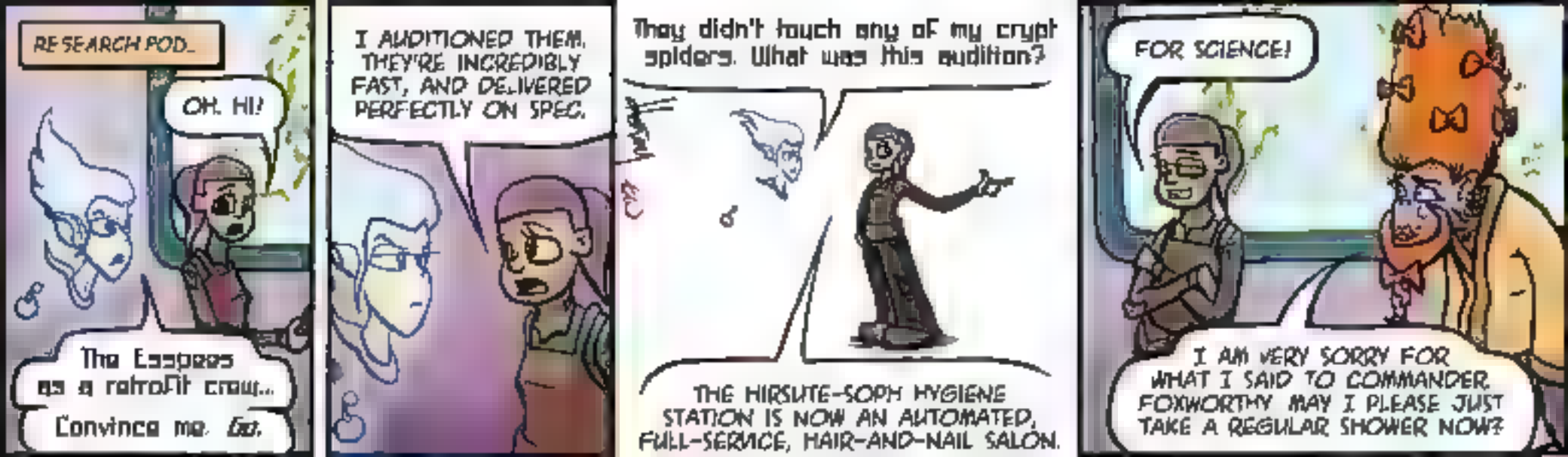
BAY THREE MIGHT BE A BETTER PLACE FOR ME TO HELP OUT FROM.
OUTSTANDING IDEA, CORPORAL.


THE FIX LIST IS LONG. WE CAN MAKE THE PARTS QUICKLY ENOUGH, BUT RETROFITS WILL TAKE DAYS.
Your list is good. Your schedule is going to make Gasca unhappy.
FORCING HIM TO WAIT IS PROBABLY BETTER THAN FORCE-FEEDING HIM HIS FEET
Maybe we should temporarily assign Corporal Ventura to customer relations.
YEAH. SHE AND GASCA WILL BOTH LIVE LONGER.

RESEARCH POD.
THREE WEEKS? WEEKS?
CHILL! YOU'LL GET THE FIRST ONE TODAY. THREE WEEKS IS FOR RETROFITTING ALL ELEVEN HUNDRED.
YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN NICER TO COMMANDER FOXWORTHY
HEY! THREE WEEKS IS JUST HOW LONG IT TAKES. IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH... WAIT
WERE YOU MEAN TO COMMANDER FOXWORTHY?
ON PURPOSE?
HE'LL TELL YOU HE WAS MEAN TO HER FOR SCIENCE, BUT YES, IT WAS DELIBERATE.
FOUR WEEKS. OR MAYBE FOUR EVERS.


WE COULD DO THE RETROFITS VERY QUICKLY, BUT THE GODDESS OF EARTH, WIND, AND PLUMBING FORBADE ANY MORE TOUCHING OF HER THINGS.
THE GODDESS? DID SHE ACTUALLY CALL HERSELF...
OH, MY. GOGGLES.
STAY RIGHT THERE I NEED TO GRAB MY OTHER TOOLBOX.
DID I FAUX-PAS THE LITTLE HUMAN?
SHE DOES ROBOTS. I THINK SHE WANTS TO TOUCH YOUR THINGS.


LATER
COMMANDER? I THINK I HAVE A SOLUTION FOR OUR LITTLE SCHEDULE PROBLEM.
WE'RE NOT BUILDING MORE ASSEMBLY BAYS, IF THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE HEADED.
NOPE! THE ESSPEES CAN HANDLE THE RETROFITS WITHOUT USING ANY OF OUR BAYS. ALL THEY NEED IS THE COMPONENTS.
And permission, which I know they do not yet have, because only I can make that out.
IS CHINOOK MAD AT ME? IT SOUNDS LIKE SHE MIGHT BE MAD AT ME.


RESEARCH POD_
OH. HI!
The Essperes as a retrofit crew...
Convince me. Ed.
I AUDITIONED THEM. THEY'RE INCREDIBLY FAST, AND DELIVERED PERFECTLY ON SPEC.
They didn't touch any of my crypt spiders. What was this audition?
THE HIRSUTE-SOPH HYGIENE STATION IS NOW AN AUTOMATED, FULL-SERVICE, HAIR-AND-NAIL SALON.
FOR SCIENCE!
I AM VERY SORRY FOR WHAT I SAID TO COMMANDER FOXWORTHY. MAY I PLEASE JUST TAKE A REGULAR SHOWER NOW?

What about security? We cannot let the Esspees modify the crypt spiders in ways that compromise any of our various perimeters.

THEIR FIXES WILL BE TWO RINGS AWAY FROM THE CONTROL NODES, AND THREE RINGS FROM YOUR OVERRIDE PATHS. IF THEY EVEN *APPROACH* YOUR SPACE, YOU CAN MELT THE SPIDER.

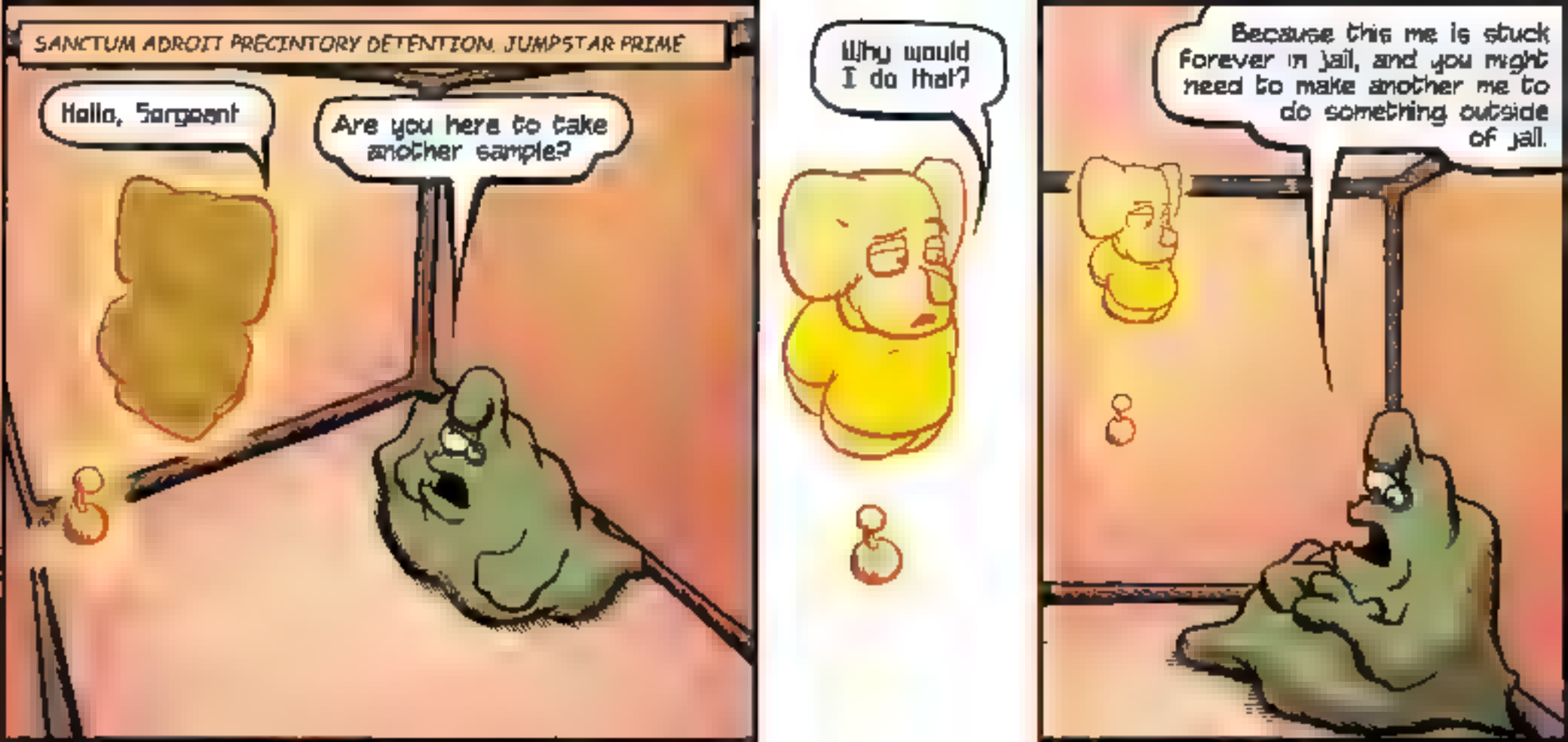
YOU'LL HAVE TO BE VIGILANT, THOUGH. YOU WILL BE MONITORING 300 ENGINEERS ACROSS THIRTY STATIONS SIMULTANEOUSLY

You are talking to the Goddess of Earth, Wind, and Plumbing. I'm already vigilant across an entire world, and its star system.

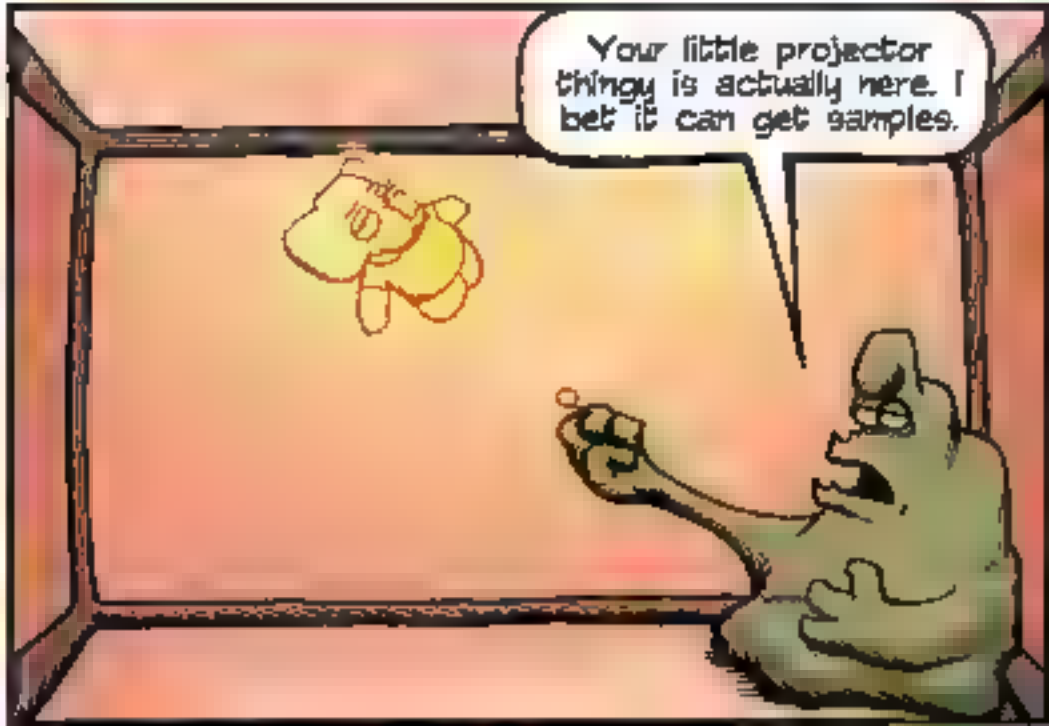
HAAANG ON.. YOU REALIZE THAT THE AMORPH WHO FIRST CALLED YOU THAT NAME DIDN'T MEAN IT AS A COMPLIMENT, RIGHT?

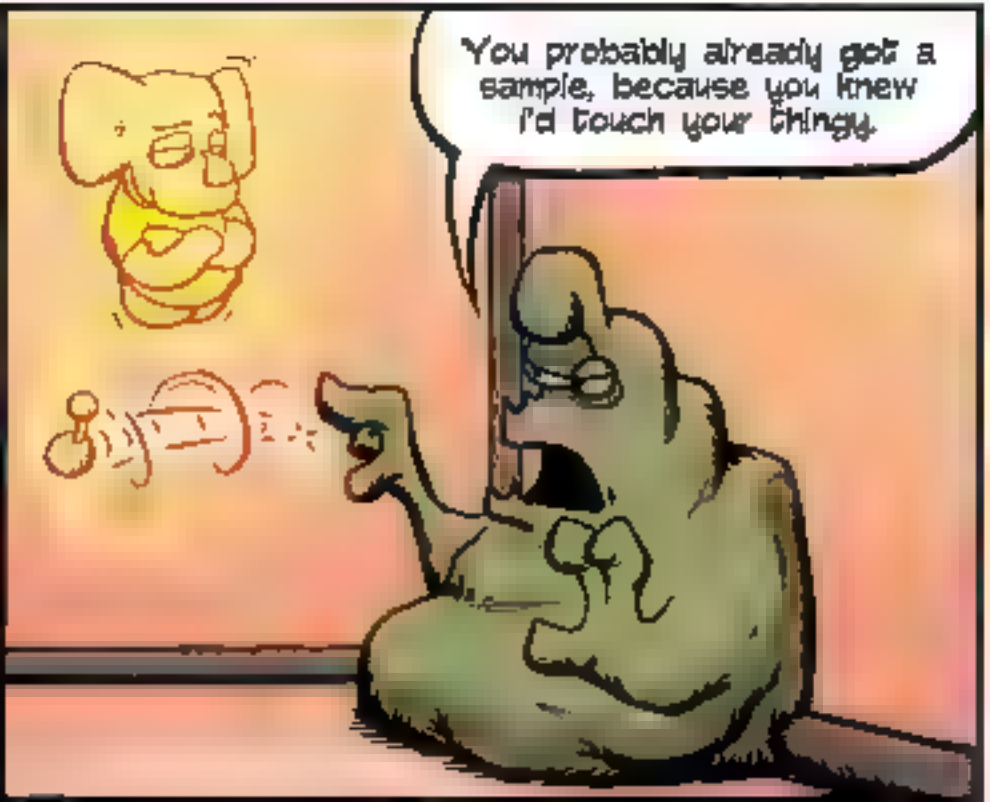
ALSO, I THINK HE'S IN JAIL RIGHT NOW.

Suffering for his art. Yes.


SANCTUM ADROIT PRECINTORY DETENTION, JUMPSTAR PRIME
Hello, Sargeant
Are you here to take another sample?
Why would I do that?
Because this me is stuck forever in jail, and you might need to make another me to do something outside of jail.

I'm not actually here, Sergeant. I'm a hologram.

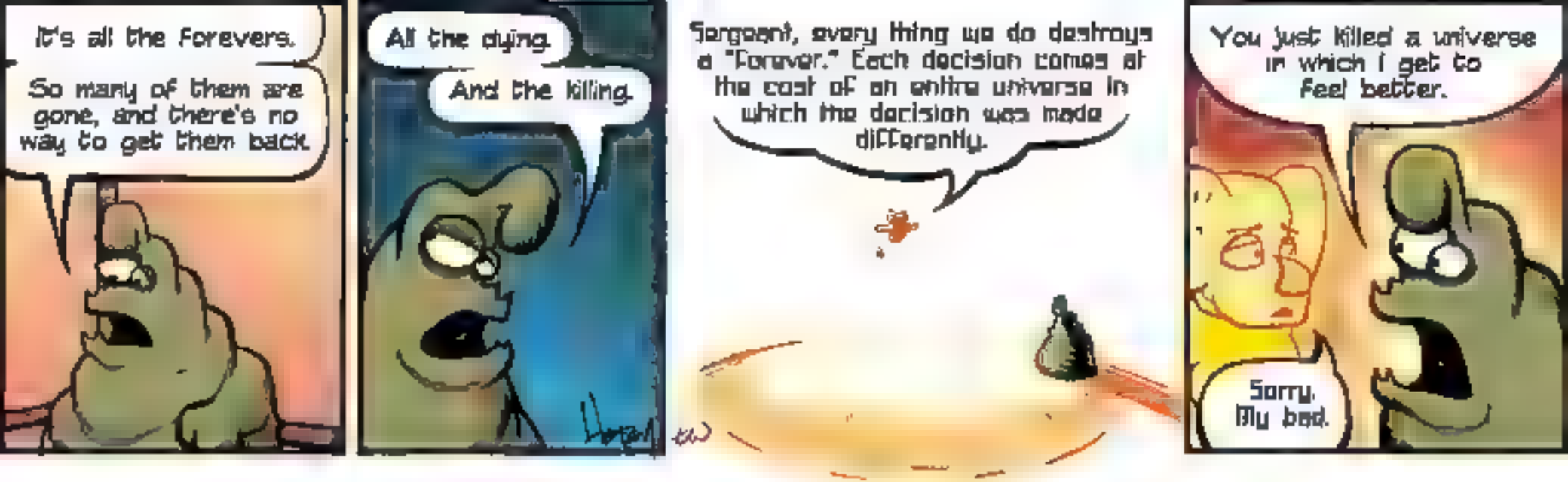

Your little projector thingy is actually here. I bet it can get samples.

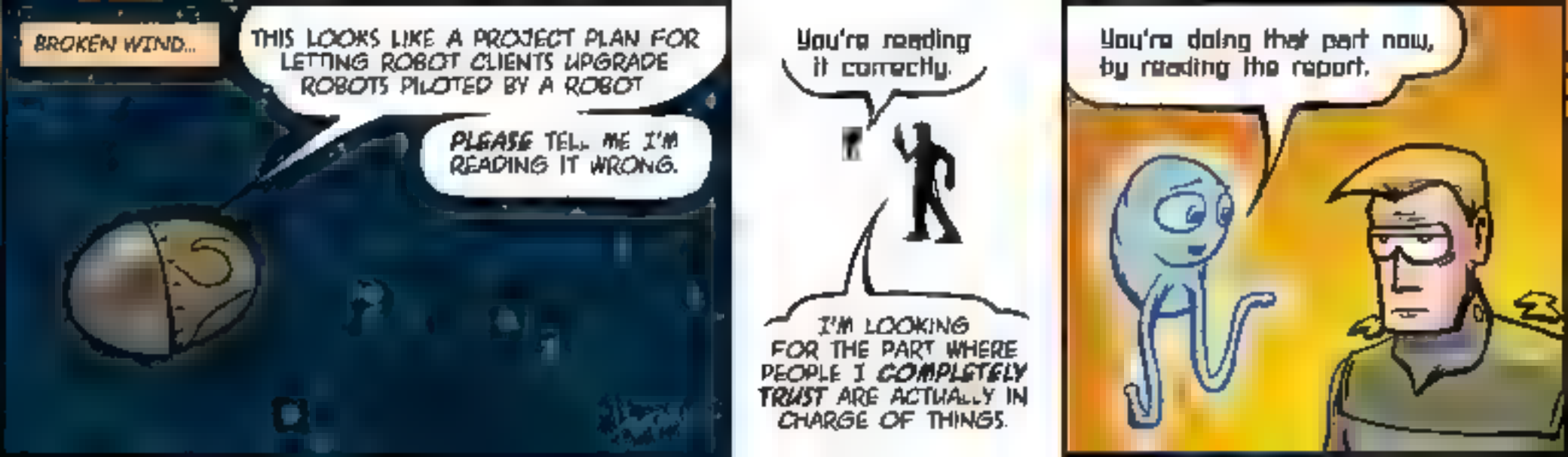

You probably already got a sample, because you knew I'd touch your thingy.

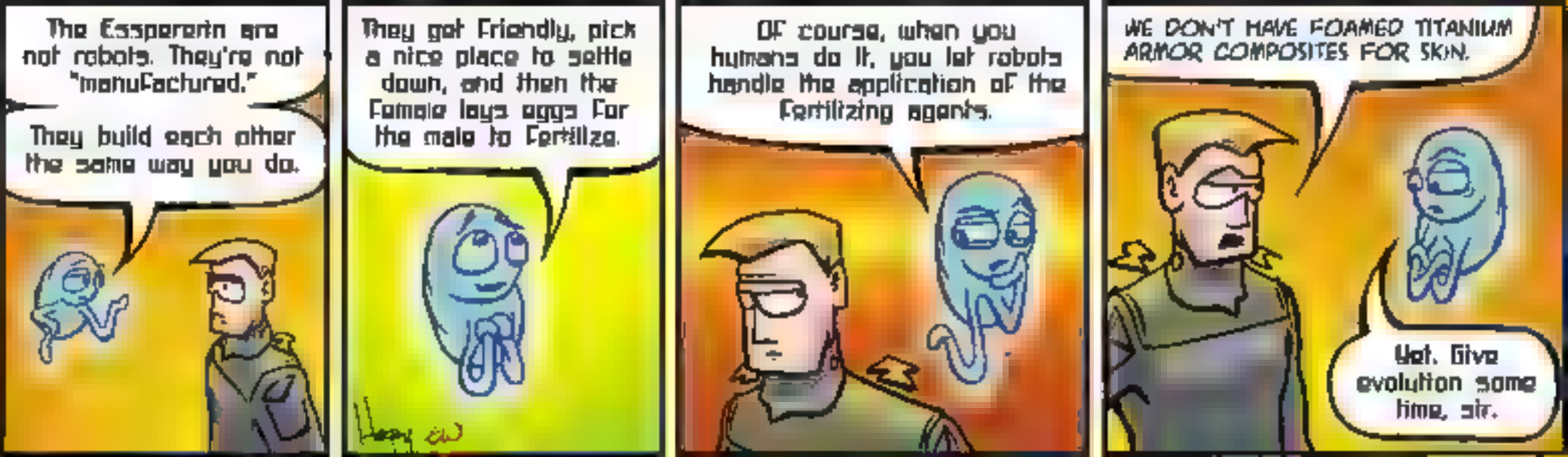
You're smarter than I remember. I'm glad I got another sample.

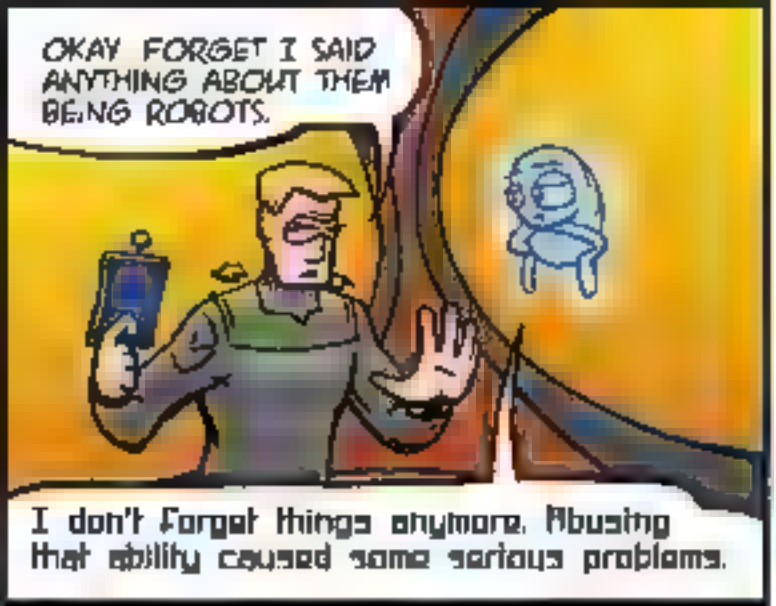
No matter how the trial goes, you won't be in here forever. It's just an assault charge.
I deserve to be in here forever.
And don't say that "prison-of-your-own-baking" thing.
"Making."
So hungry.

What's the matter, Sergeant What's really the matter?
You know everything, so you already know.
Yes, but until you try to describe it to someone else, YOU won't actually know.
Or maybe you could just tell me, and save us some time.
If it was just TIME that I wanted to save I would be doing a great many things very differently.

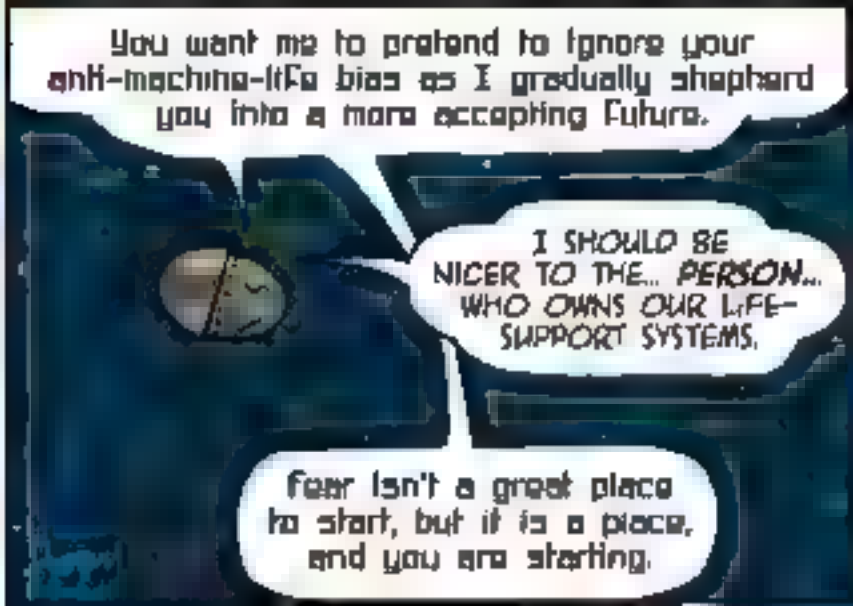

It's all the Forevers.
So many of them are gone, and there's no way to get them back.
All the dying.
And the killing.
Sergeant, every thing we do destroys a "Forever." Each decision comes at the cost of an entire universe in which the decision was made differently.
You just killed a universe in which I get to feel better.
Sorry. My bad.


BROKEN WIND...
THIS LOOKS LIKE A PROJECT PLAN FOR LETTING ROBOT CLIENTS UPGRADE ROBOTS PILOTED BY A ROBOT
PLEASE TELL ME I'M READING IT WRONG.
You're reading it correctly.
I'M LOOKING FOR THE PART WHERE PEOPLE I COMPLETELY TRUST ARE ACTUALLY IN CHARGE OF THINGS.
You're doing that part now, by reading the report.


The Essperertn are not robots. They're not "manufactured."
They build each other the same way you do.
They get friendly, pick a nice place to settle down, and then the female lays eggs for the male to fertilize.
Of course, when you humans do it, you let robots handle the application of the fertilizing agents.
WE DON'T HAVE FOAMED TITANIUM ARMOR COMPOSITES FOR SKIN.
Yet. Give evolution some time, sir.

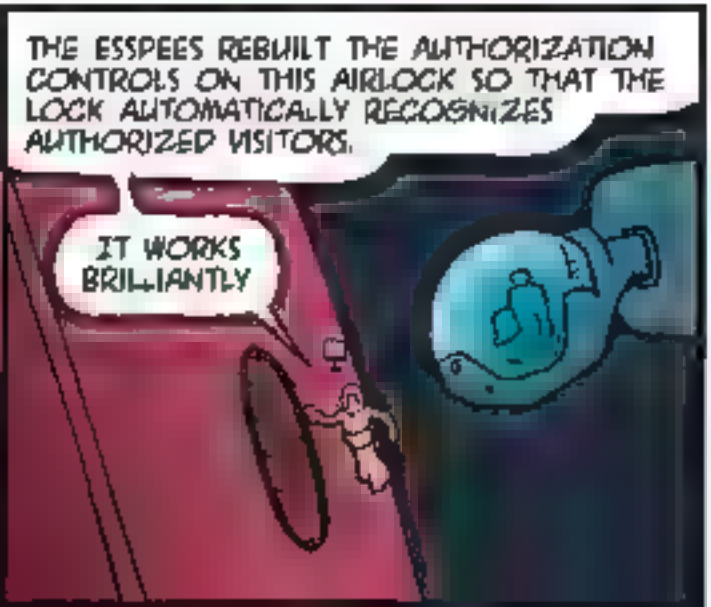

OKAY FORGET I SAID ANYTHING ABOUT THEM BEING ROBOTS.
I don't forget things anymore. Abusing that ability caused some serious problems.

SORRY I DON'T MEAN FORGET FORGET
I MEAN... UMM...

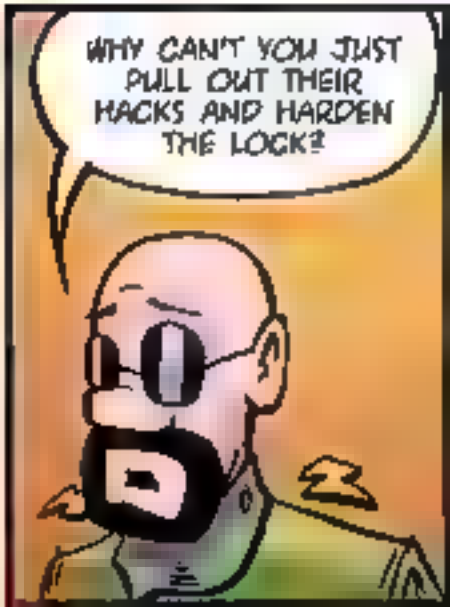

You want me to pretend to ignore your anti-machine-life bias as I gradually shepherd you into a more accepting future.
I SHOULD BE NICER TO THE... PERSON... WHO OWNS OUR LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS.
Fear isn't a great place to start, but it is a place, and you are starting.

RESEARCH POD. LOCK THREE
DO YOU WANT ME TO START WITH THE SOLUTION, OR WITH THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM?
OH, DEAR.
SOLUTION FIRST

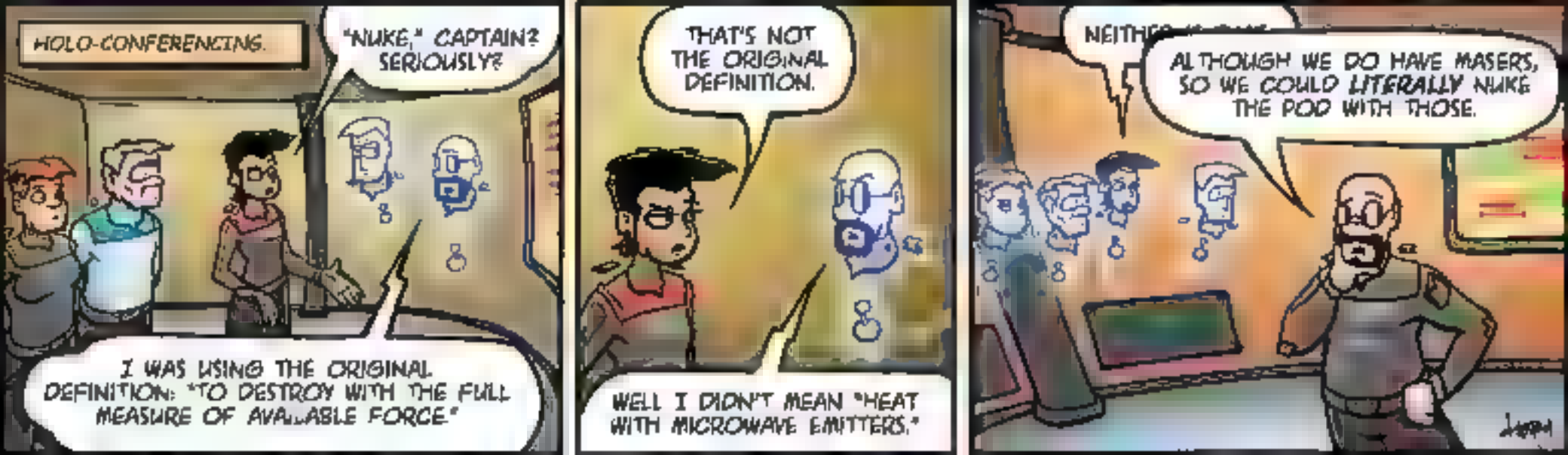
WE NEED TO CUT NEW HOLES IN THE HULL, AND INSTALL ALL-NEW AIRLOCKS. THEN WE MUST NOT INTEGRATE THOSE LOCKS INTO THE POD'S OTHER SYSTEMS.
HOW CAN IT POSSIBLY BE THAT BAD?

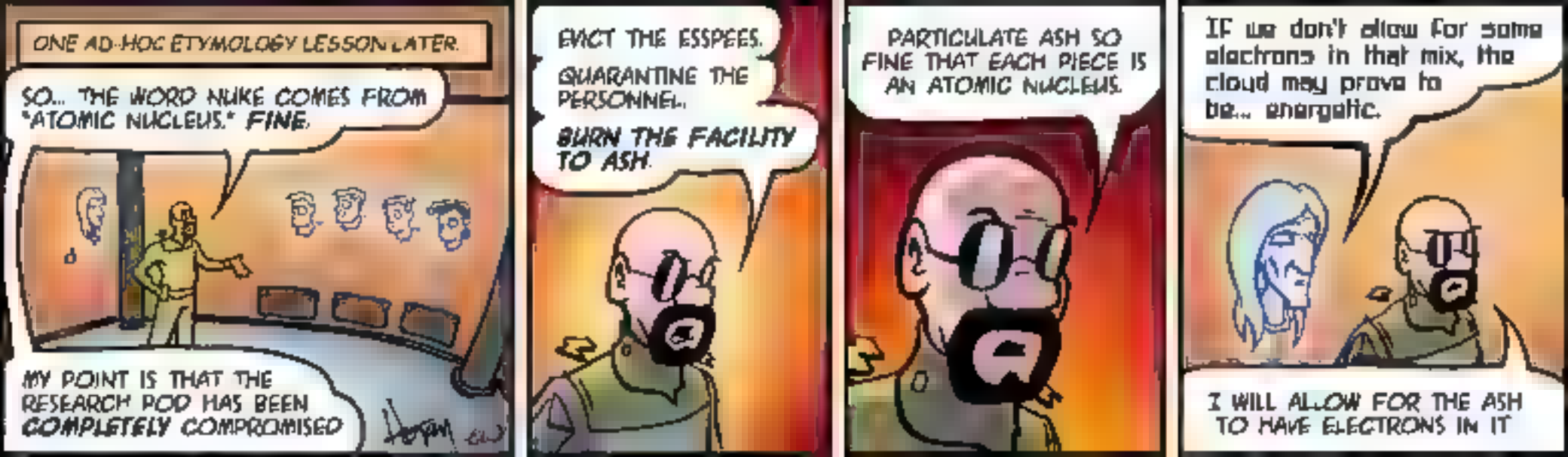

THE ESSPEES REBUILT THE AUTHORIZATION CONTROLS ON THIS AIRLOCK SO THAT THE LOCK AUTOMATICALLY RECOGNIZES AUTHORIZED VISITORS.
IT WORKS BRILLIANTLY

THAT AUTH-LIST IS BEING PULLED, REAL-TIME, FROM LODGING AND SHIFT MAN.FESTS VIA A PHREAK-TAP ON WHAT WAS *SUPPOSED* TO BE A SECURE MODULE.

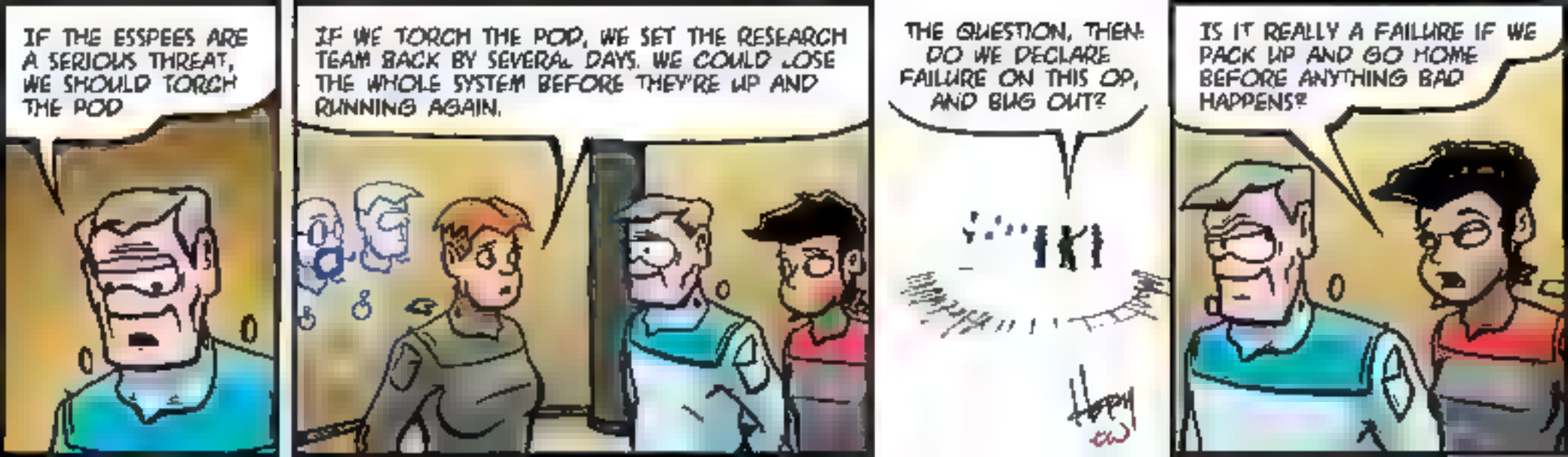

WHY CAN'T YOU JUST PULL OUT THEIR HACKS AND HARDEN THE LOCK?

I CAN'T BE SURE I'VE FOUND ALL OF THEIR HACKS. THE ONLY WAY TO SECURE THIS AIRLOCK IS TO SLAG IT, AND THEN PAVE OVER IT WITH HULL METAL.
MAYBE IF I'D BEEN WATCHING THEM THE WHOLE TIME. MAYBE I COULD UNDO EVERYTHING THEY DID
THEY'RE IN THE POD NOW THURL. HOW CLOSELY ARE THEY BEING WATCHED?
EXCUSE ME CORPORAL? YOUR CAPTAIN JUST ISSUED A WORK ORDER THAT SAYS "NUKE THE POD FROM ORBIT"


HOLO-CONFERENCING.
"NUKE," CAPTAIN? SERIOUSLY?
I WAS USING THE ORIGINAL DEFINITION: "TO DESTROY WITH THE FULL MEASURE OF AVAILABLE FORCE."
THAT'S NOT THE ORIGINAL DEFINITION.
WELL I DIDN'T MEAN "HEAT WITH MICROWAVE EMITTERS."
NEITHER
ALTHOUGH WE DO HAVE MASERS, SO WE COULD LITERALLY NUKE THE POD WITH THOSE.

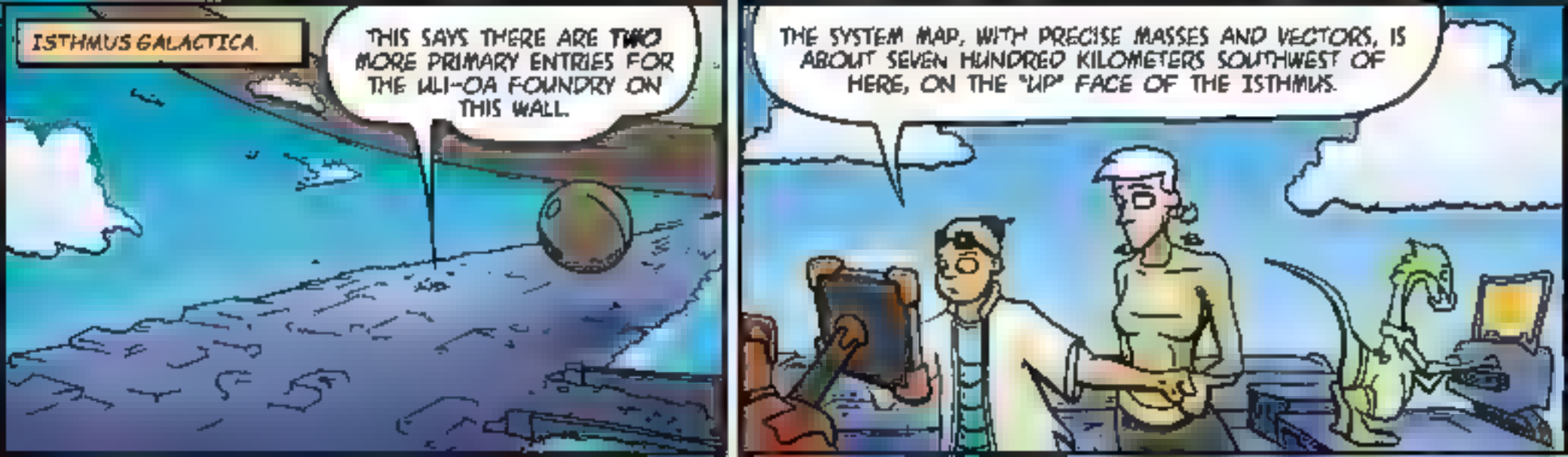

ONE AD-HOC ETYMOLOGY LESSON LATER.
SO... THE WORD NUKE COMES FROM "ATOMIC NUCLEUS." FINE.
MY POINT IS THAT THE RESEARCH POD HAS BEEN COMPLETELY COMPROMISED
EVACT THE ESSPEES.
QUARANTINE THE PERSONNEL.
BURN THE FACILITY TO ASH.
PARTICULATE ASH SO FINE THAT EACH PIECE IS AN ATOMIC NUCLEUS.
IF we don't allow for some electrons in that mix, the cloud may prove to be... energetic.
I WILL ALLOW FOR THE ASH TO HAVE ELECTRONS IN IT

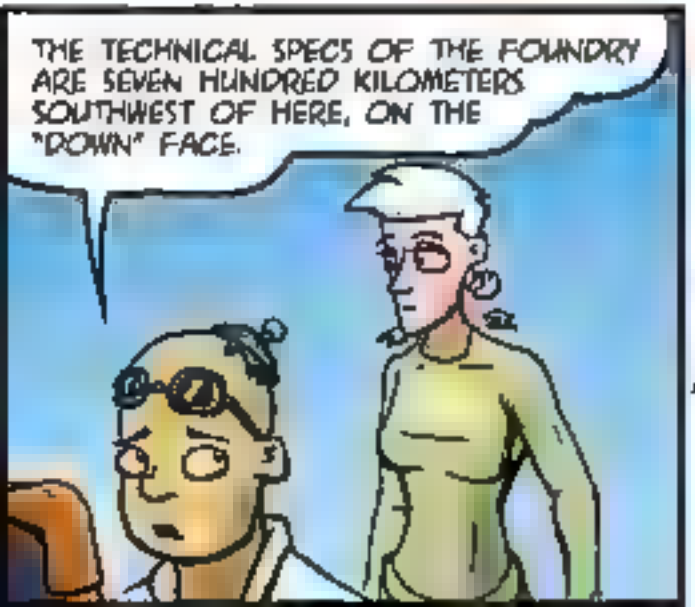
I'M WITH CAPTAIN ANDREYASN. IAFA AND I CAN SECURE THE SYSTEM FOR A WHILE, BUT WE ARE VERY VULNERABLE TO AN ATTACK FROM OUR CLIENTS.
WHO ARE NOT CUTE LITTLE ROBO-FAIRIES. ESPECIALLY NOT WHEN THEY'RE WEARING THOSE POWER-SUITS.
THOSE AREN'T REALLY SUITS. THEY'RE ALIVE.
THINK OF THEM AS GIANT HORSES, AND THE ESSPEES RIDE THEM BY CLIMBING INTO THEIR BRAINS.
"ARMORED CAVALRY" IS AN OLD TERM. NICE TO SEE THAT IT STILL FITS.


IF THE ESSPEES ARE A SERIOUS THREAT, WE SHOULD TORCH THE POD
IF WE TORCH THE POD, WE SET THE RESEARCH TEAM BACK BY SEVERAL DAYS. WE COULD LOSE THE WHOLE SYSTEM BEFORE THEY'RE UP AND RUNNING AGAIN.
THE QUESTION, THEN: DO WE DECLARE FAILURE ON THIS OP, AND BUG OUT?
IS IT REALLY A FAILURE IF WE PACK UP AND GO HOME BEFORE ANYTHING BAD HAPPENS?

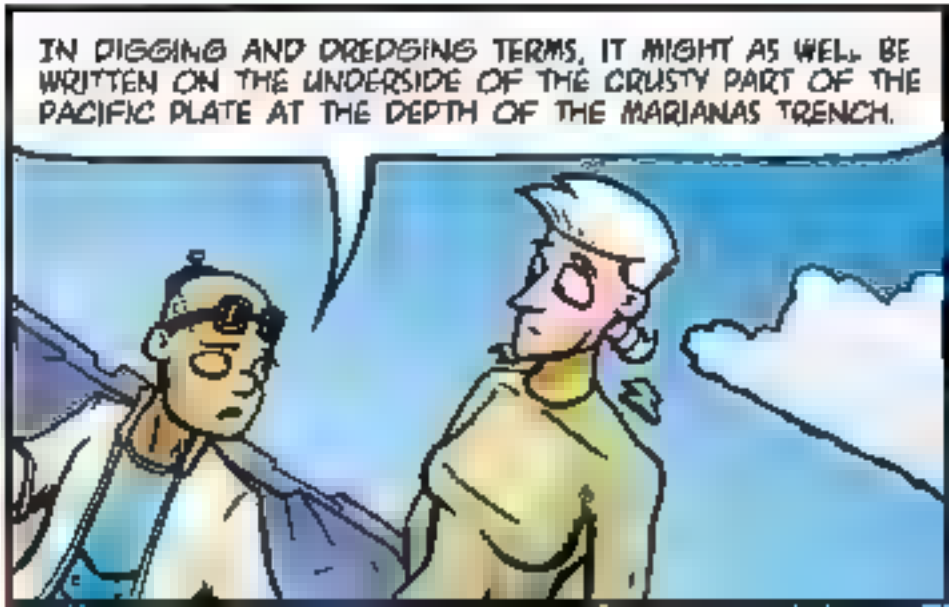
Ventura and I have been monitoring the Essposs very closely on some "audition" projects. They're amazing engineers, but they're not magical.
We must be vigilant, but we gain nothing by exaggerating the risks.
THAT ISN'T GOING TO MAKE ME SLEEP ANY EASIER.
Your lack of sleep might be more accurately ascribed to humanity's execrable attempts at risk assessment
WORST LULLABY EVER.

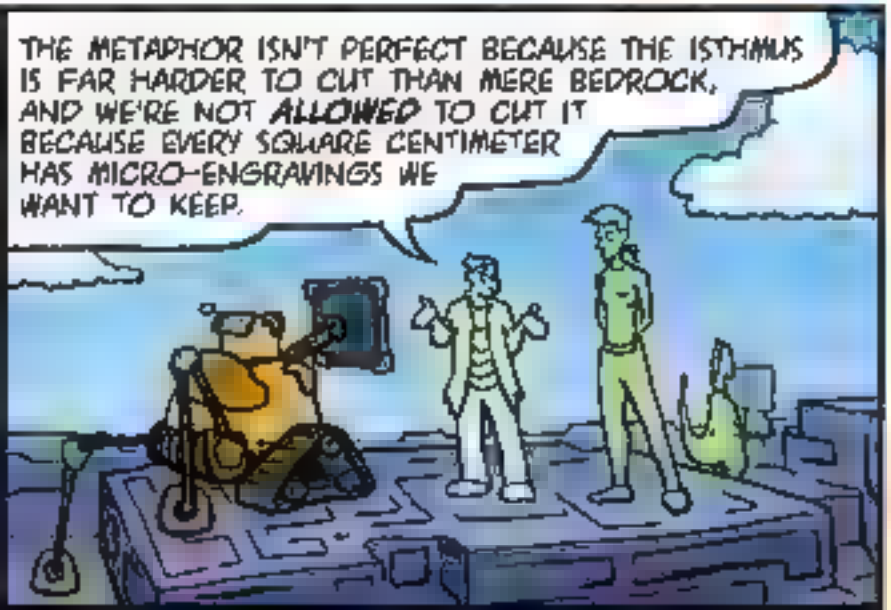
ULTIMATELY WE'RE ALL WORKING FOR YOU ON THIS ONE, MURTAUGH.
STICK IT OUT, OR BAIL OUT.. IT'S YOUR CALL
THIS RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT
THE ANSWERS BURIED HERE MAY BE THE ANSWERS THAT SAVE EVERYBODY.
CIVILIZATION CANNOT AFFORD FOR US TO BE AFRAID
PITHY
WHAT IF THOSE WORDS END UP ON YOUR TOMBSTONE?
PUT IT WHERE LOTS OF PEOPLE CAN READ IT


ISTHMUS GALACTICA.
THIS SAYS THERE ARE TWO MORE PRIMARY ENTRIES FOR THE ULI-OA FOUNDRY ON THIS WALL.
THE SYSTEM MAP, WITH PRECISE MASSES AND VECTORS, IS ABOUT SEVEN HUNDRED KILOMETERS SOUTHWEST OF HERE, ON THE "UP" FACE OF THE ISTHMUS.


THE TECHNICAL SPECS OF THE FOUNDRY ARE SEVEN HUNDRED KILOMETERS SOUTHWEST OF HERE, ON THE "DOWN" FACE.

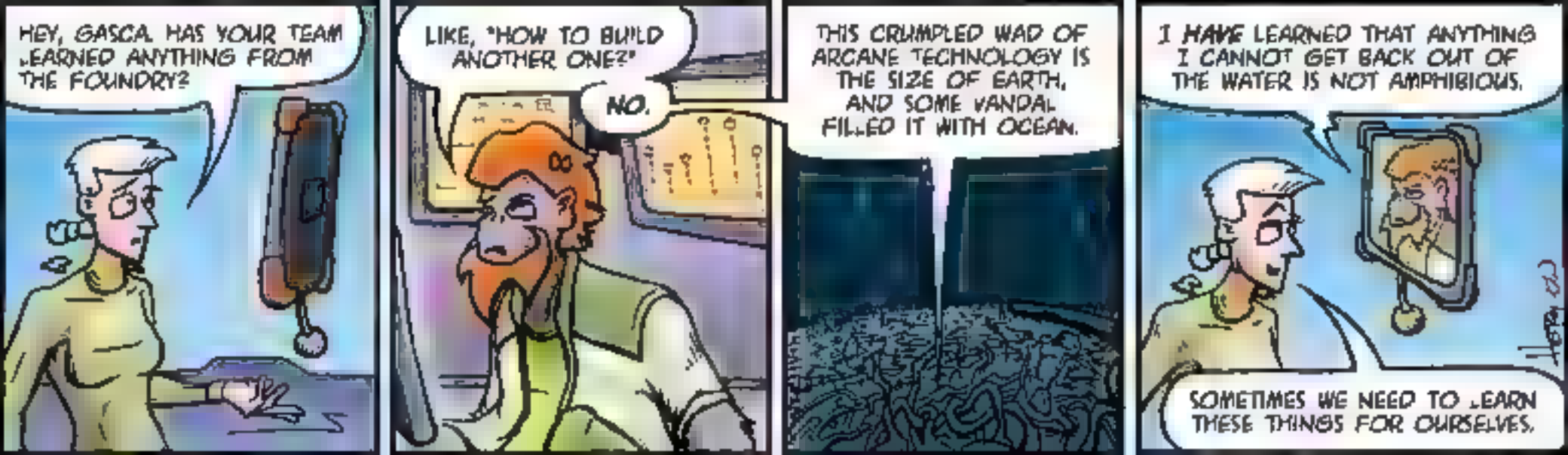
THAT'S THE ONE WE WANT. CAN WE GET TO IT?


IN DIGGING AND DREDGING TERMS, IT MIGHT AS WELL BE WRITTEN ON THE UNDERSIDE OF THE CRUSTY PART OF THE PACIFIC PLATE AT THE DEPTH OF THE MARIANAS TRENCH.

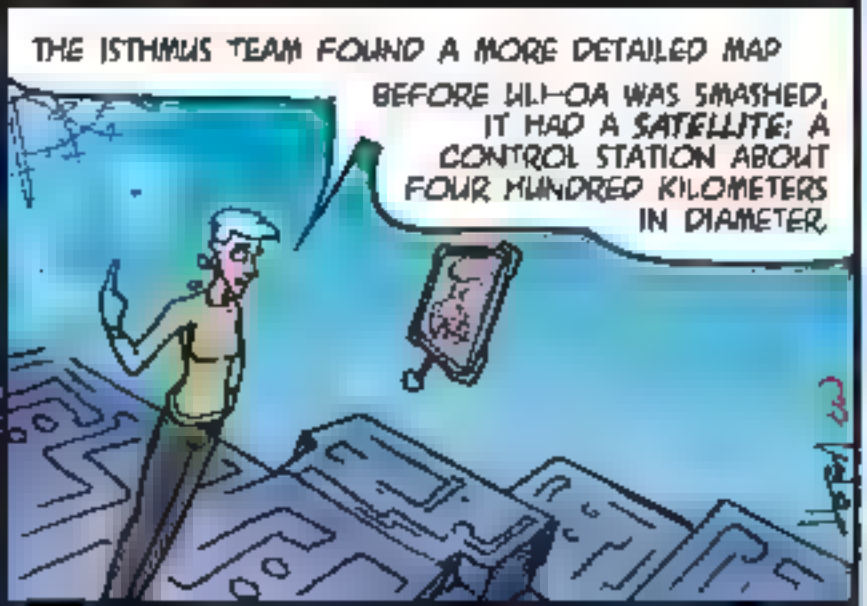

THE METAPHOR ISN'T PERFECT BECAUSE THE ISTHMUS IS FAR HARDER TO CUT THAN MERE BEDROCK, AND WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO CUT IT BECAUSE EVERY SQUARE CENTIMETER HAS MICRO-ENGRAVINGS WE WANT TO KEEP.

CAN WE GET TO IT?

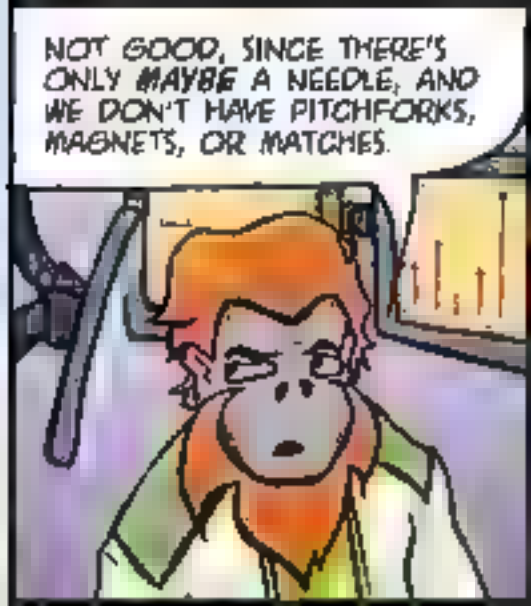
DIDN'T I JUST SAY "NO"?
I'M PRETTY SURE YOU SAID I NEED TO FIND A BETTER "WE."

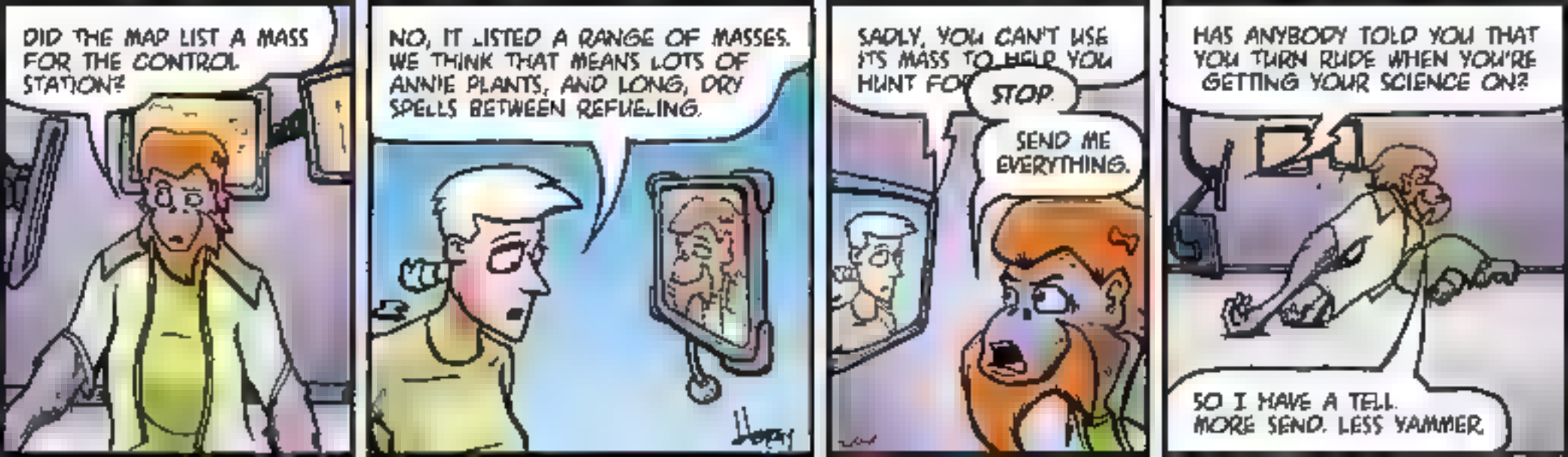

HEY, GASCA. HAS YOUR TEAM LEARNED ANYTHING FROM THE FOUNDRY?
LIKE, "HOW TO BUILD ANOTHER ONE?"
NO.
THIS CRUMPLED WAD OF ARCANE TECHNOLOGY IS THE SIZE OF EARTH, AND SOME VANDAL FILLED IT WITH OCEAN.
I HAVE LEARNED THAT ANYTHING I CANNOT GET BACK OUT OF THE WATER IS NOT AMPHIBIOUS.
SOMETIMES WE NEED TO LEARN THESE THINGS FOR OURSELVES.

IT'S GOTTEN CRAZY HERE. WE HAVE A NEW SET OF SECURITY PROTOCOLS, AND THE MERCENARIES HAVE HIRED THE SQUATTERS TO UPGRADE THE SPIDER-BOTS.
I ONLY SEE ONE PERSON SQUATTING, AND HE IS NOT US.
IF THEY'RE THAT MOUTHY, THEY'RE PROBABLY PRETTY GOOD ENGINEERS.
THEY TURNED MY SHOWER INTO A ROBOT THAT PAINTED MY TOENAILS.


THE ISTHMUS TEAM FOUND A MORE DETAILED MAP
BEFORE ULI-OA WAS SMASHED, IT HAD A SATELLITE: A CONTROL STATION ABOUT FOUR HUNDRED KILOMETERS IN DIAMETER.

IT MIGHT STILL BE IN THAT MESS SOMEWHERE.
AND IT MIGHT HAVE THE ANSWERS WE NEED
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE OLD "NEEDLE-IN-A-HAYSTACK" PROBLEM?


NOT GOOD, SINCE THERE'S ONLY MAYBE A NEEDLE, AND WE DON'T HAVE PITCHFORKS, MAGNETS, OR MATCHES.


DID THE MAP LIST A MASS FOR THE CONTROL STATION?
NO, IT LISTED A RANGE OF MASSES. WE THINK THAT MEANS LOTS OF ANNIE PLANTS, AND LONG, DRY SPELLS BETWEEN REFUELING.
SADLY, YOU CAN'T USE ITS MASS TO HELP YOU HUNT FO
STOP.
SEND ME EVERYTHING.
HAS ANYBODY TOLD YOU THAT YOU TURN RUDE WHEN YOU'RE GETTING YOUR SCIENCE ON?
SO I HAVE A TELL. MORE SEND. LESS YAMMER.

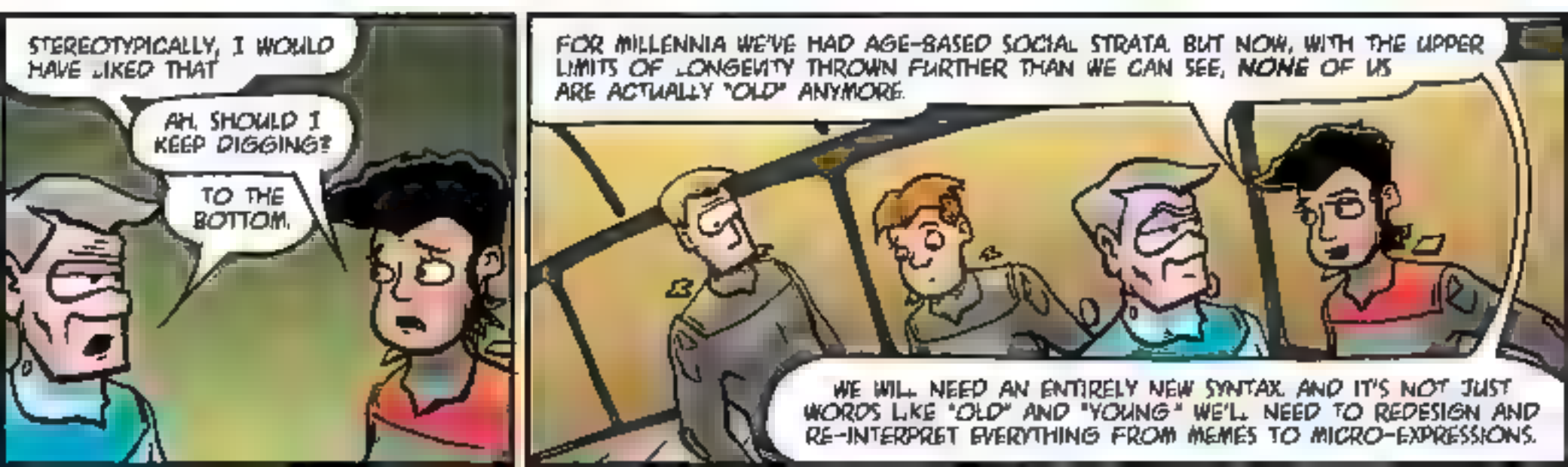
BOAT #6 RETURNS TO BROKEN WIND...
COMMODORE ON DECK!
YES, YES. AS YOU WERE, EVERYONE.
WAS THAT REALLY NECESSARY?
IT LETS THEM SHOW THEIR RESPECT
WHOA, WHOA, WHOA! DAD! YOUR HAIRLINE!
DO I NEED TO LET YOU SHOW IT SOME RESPECT?
THERE'S ONLY ONE LINE!

I'VE BEEN GROWING IT BACK FOR SEVERAL WEEKS ACCORDING TO THE DOCTOR, MOST OF THAT TIME WAS SPENT RE-GROWING FOLLICLES.

IF I GET TO CHOOSE, I CHOOSE TO NOT LOOK OLD FOR THE NEXT LONGEVITY-THOUSAND YEARS.
THERE'S STILL A LOT OF GREY IN THERE.
I THINK MAYBE ALL THE GREY IS STILL IN THERE.

I SAID I DON'T WANT TO LOOK OLD. I DO WANT TO LOOK AWESOME.

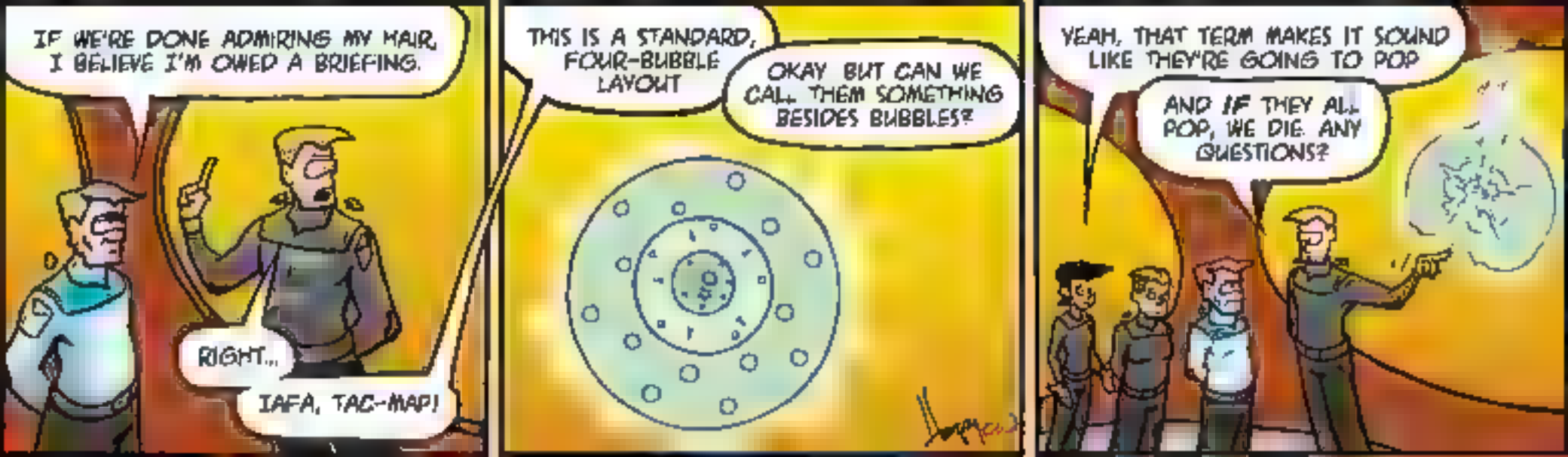
I NOTICED YOUR HAIR, COMMODORE BUT I WAS AFRAID IT WOULD BE RUDE TO COMMENT ON IT
HOW SO, LIEUTENANT?
YOU KNOW THE STEREOTYPE, RIGHT? THE OLD MAN VAINLY ATTEMPTING TO RESTORE A YOUTHFUL APPEARANCE?
I DO, BUT BY ALL MEANS GO ON.
A COMMENT ON YOUR HAIR MIGHT HAVE COME ACROSS AS AN ACCUSATION OF VANITY
OR YOU COULD HAVE SAID "I LIKE WHAT YOU'RE DOING WITH YOUR HAIR, COMMODORE."

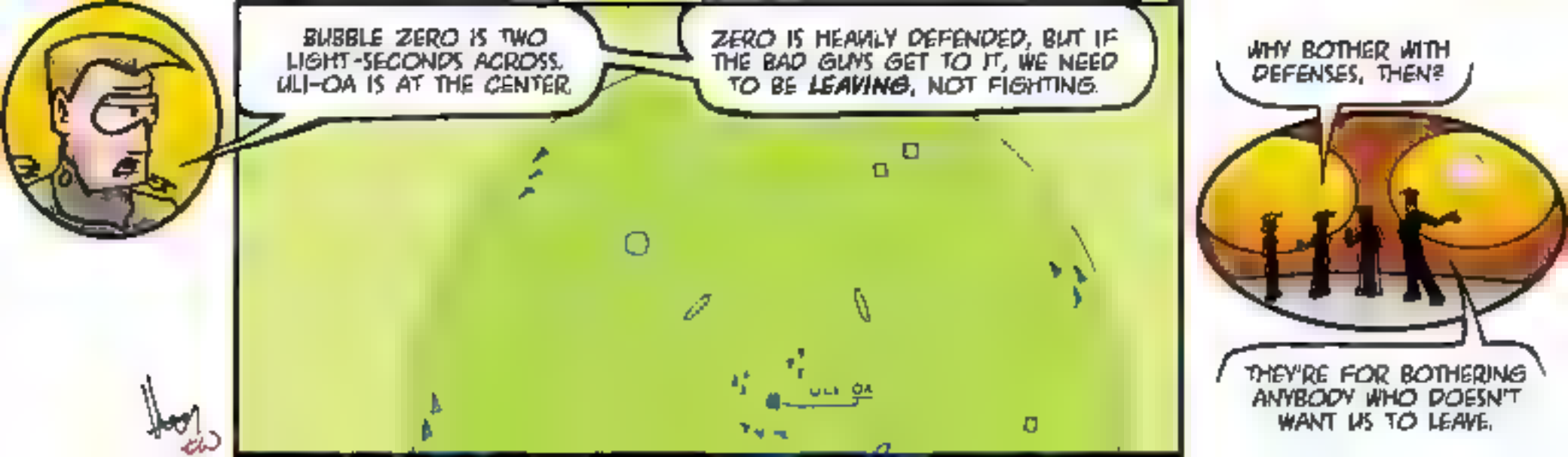

STEREOTYPICALLY, I WOULD HAVE LIKED THAT
AH. SHOULD I KEEP DIGGING?
TO THE BOTTOM.
FOR MILLENNIA WE'VE HAD AGE-BASED SOCIAL STRATA. BUT NOW, WITH THE UPPER LIMITS OF LONGEVITY THROWN FURTHER THAN WE CAN SEE, NONE OF US ARE ACTUALLY "OLD" ANYMORE.
WE WILL NEED AN ENTIRELY NEW SYNTAX. AND IT'S NOT JUST WORDS LIKE "OLD" AND "YOUNG." WE'LL NEED TO REDESIGN AND RE-INTERPRET EVERYTHING FROM MEMES TO MICRO-EXPRESSIONS.

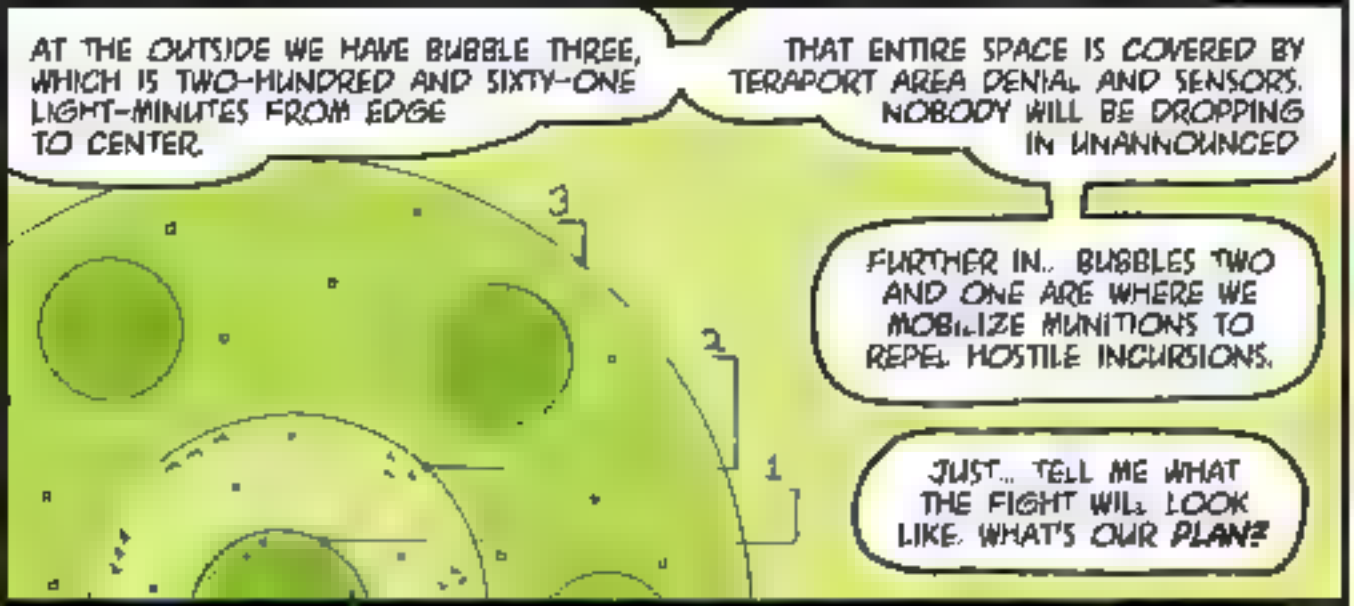
WHAT WILL THIS CONVERSATION SOUND LIKE IN FIFTY YEARS?

LET'S GO BACK TO THE PART WHERE YOU SAID "NONE OF US" AND "ANYMORE."
I'M SEVENTY-FOUR.

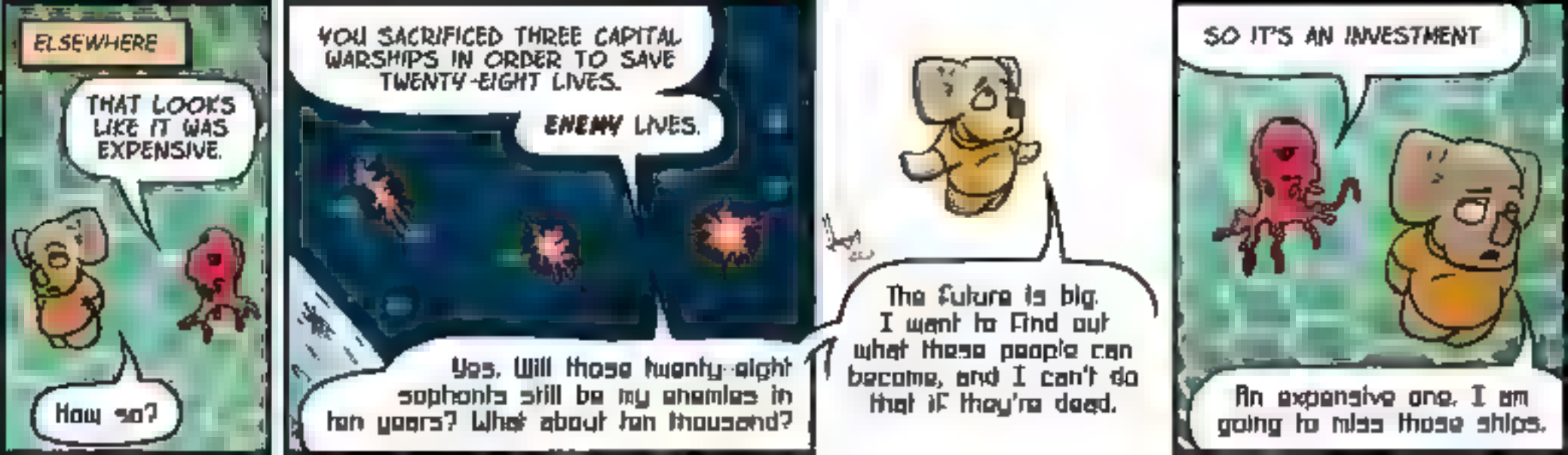
SOUND OFF!
FIFTY.
SIXTY-THREE.
YOUNGEST ONE IN THE ROOM.
Cherish it.


IF WE'RE DONE ADMIRING MY HAIR, I BELIEVE I'M OWED A BRIEFING.
RIGHT...
IAFA, TAC-MAP!
THIS IS A STANDARD, FOUR-BUBBLE LAYOUT
OKAY BUT CAN WE CALL THEM SOMETHING BESIDES BUBBLES?
YEAH, THAT TERM MAKES IT SOUND LIKE THEY'RE GOING TO POP
AND IF THEY ALL POP, WE DIE. ANY QUESTIONS?


BUBBLE ZERO IS TWO LIGHT-SECONDS ACROSS. ULI-OA IS AT THE CENTER.
ZERO IS HEAVILY DEFENDED, BUT IF THE BAD GUYS GET TO IT, WE NEED TO BE LEAVING, NOT FIGHTING.
ULI-OA
WHY BOTHER WITH DEFENSES, THEN?
THEY'RE FOR BOTHERING ANYBODY WHO DOESN'T WANT US TO LEAVE.


AT THE OUTSIDE WE HAVE BUBBLE THREE, WHICH IS TWO-HUNDRED AND SIXTY-ONE LIGHT-MINUTES FROM EDGE TO CENTER.
THAT ENTIRE SPACE IS COVERED BY TERAPORT AREA DENIAL AND SENSORS. NOBODY WILL BE DROPPING IN UNANNOUNCED
3
2
1
FURTHER IN... BUBBLES TWO AND ONE ARE WHERE WE MOBILIZE MUNITIONS TO REPEL HOSTILE INCURSIONS.
JUST... TELL ME WHAT THE FIGHT WILL LOOK LIKE. WHAT'S OUR PLAN?

DON'T YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW MANY OF EACH TYPE OF MUNITION WE'VE
BIG NUMBERS WILL NOT MAKE THAT PICTURE ANY CLEARER

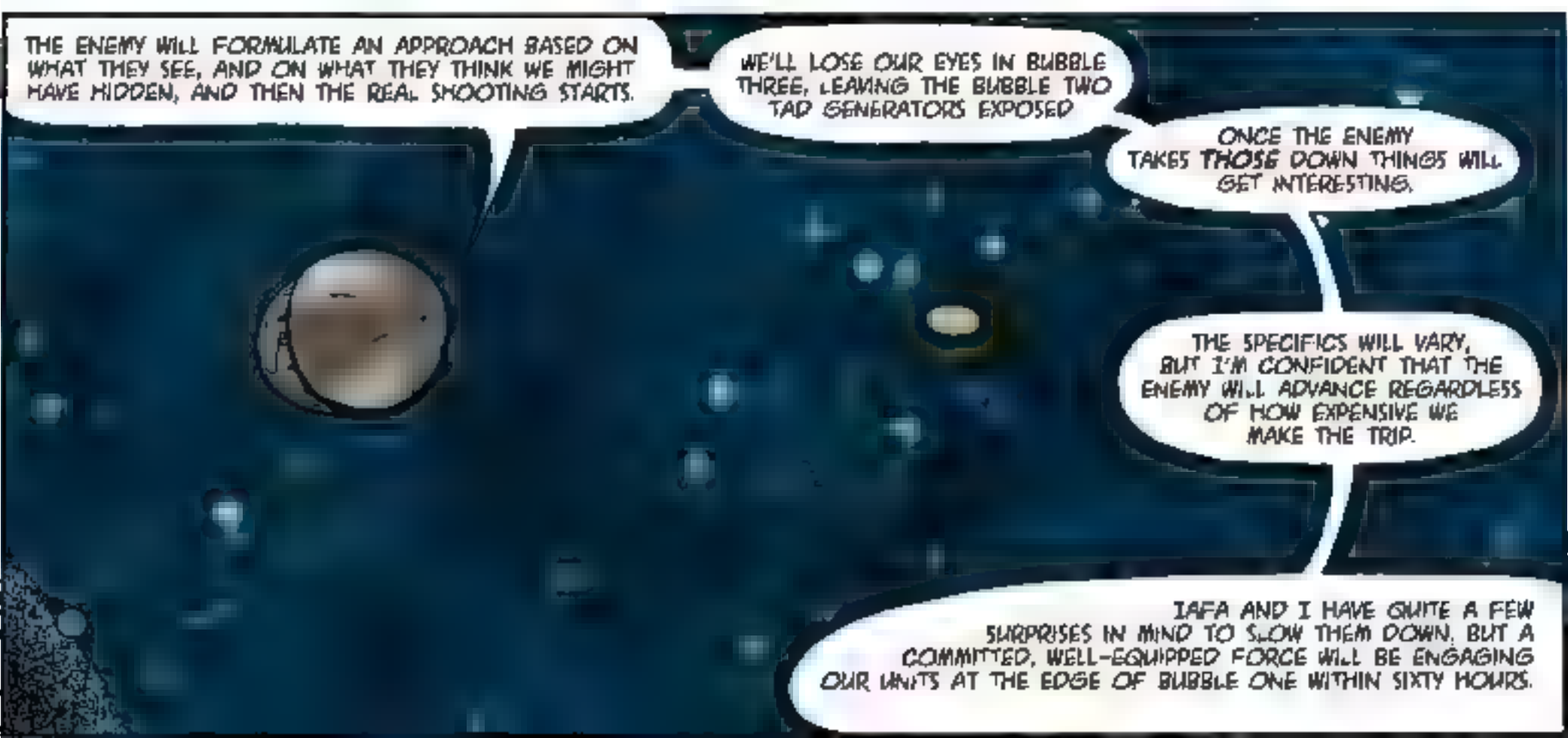

ELSEWHERE
THAT LOOKS LIKE IT WAS EXPENSIVE.
How so?
YOU SACRIFICED THREE CAPITAL WARSHIPS IN ORDER TO SAVE TWENTY-EIGHT LIVES.
ENEMY LIVES.
Yes. Will those twenty-eight sophonts still be my enemies in ten years? What about ten thousand?
The future is big. I want to find out what these people can become, and I can't do that if they're dead.
SO IT'S AN INVESTMENT
An expensive one. I am going to miss those ships.

THE REMAINING COMBATANTS SEEM QUITE DETERMINED. YOUR ENTERPRISE HERE IS DESTINED TO FAIL, ASSUMING YOU REMAIN NON-COMPROMISING IN YOUR NOBLE APPROACH.

AND EVEN IF YOU **DO** SUCCESSFULLY CAPTURE OISRI WITH NO ENEMY CASUALTIES, THE AREA WILL REQUIRE ONGOING DEFENSE. THOSE YOU CHASE OFF WILL RETURN, AND YOU WILL EVENTUALLY BE FORCED TO KILL SOME OF THEM.

Denizens of the Giant Theater of Operations!
Go home. There is nothing to see here.
Sorry if I misled anyone. That bit was worth sticking around for.
But now there is nothing to see here.

THE BATTLE PLAN.
THE MOST LIKELY ATTACK WILL TAKE ABOUT SIXTY HOURS.
SIXTY HOURS UNTIL WE WIN?
SIXTY HOURS UNTIL WE RUN.
IT'LL START WITH A SWARM OF INBOUND SENSOR DRONES DOING HIGH-ENERGY, ACTIVE SCANS, WHILE PASSIVE-SENSOR STEALTH DRONES SLIDE IN QUIETLY.
WE'LL MISS THE REALLY SNEAKY ONES, AND THEY'LL BEGIN MAPPING BUBBLE THREE. THEY'LL GET TO BUBBLE TWO BEFORE WE SPOT THEM.


THE ENEMY WILL FORMULATE AN APPROACH BASED ON WHAT THEY SEE, AND ON WHAT THEY THINK WE MIGHT HAVE HIDDEN, AND THEN THE REAL SHOOTING STARTS.
WE'LL LOSE OUR EYES IN BUBBLE THREE, LEAVING THE BUBBLE TWO TAD GENERATORS EXPOSED
ONCE THE ENEMY TAKES THOSE DOWN THINGS WILL GET INTERESTING.
THE SPECIFICS WILL VARY, BUT I'M CONFIDENT THAT THE ENEMY WILL ADVANCE REGARDLESS OF HOW EXPENSIVE WE MAKE THE TRIP.
IAFA AND I HAVE QUITE A FEW SURPRISES IN MIND TO SLOW THEM DOWN, BUT A COMMITTED, WELL-EQUIPPED FORCE WILL BE ENGAGING OUR UNITS AT THE EDGE OF BUBBLE ONE WITHIN SIXTY HOURS.

THESE "SURPRISES," MIGHT ANY OF THEM BE LONG-GUN SHOTS FROM CHINOOK?
THOSE WON THE DAY IN GELESCHWL.

THE LONG GUN IS WHAT MILITARY HISTORIANS WOULD CALL "THE NUCLEAR OPTION."

WHICH DOES NOT GET ITS NAME FROM GIVING LEGISLATORS NOTHING BUT MICROWAVED FOOD UNTIL THEY AGREE TO VOTE ON YOUR LAW
WE ALL LEARNED SOMETHING TODAY.

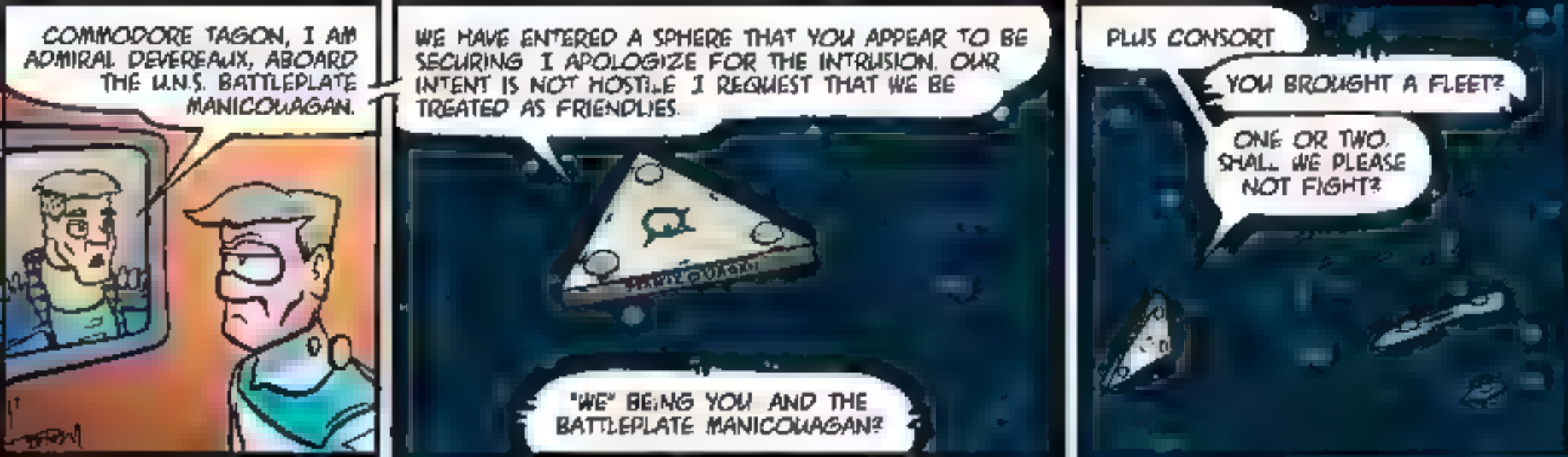
USING CHINOOK'S LONG-GUN BATTERY FOR DEFENSE HERE COULD LEAVE EINA-AF-A EXPOSED.

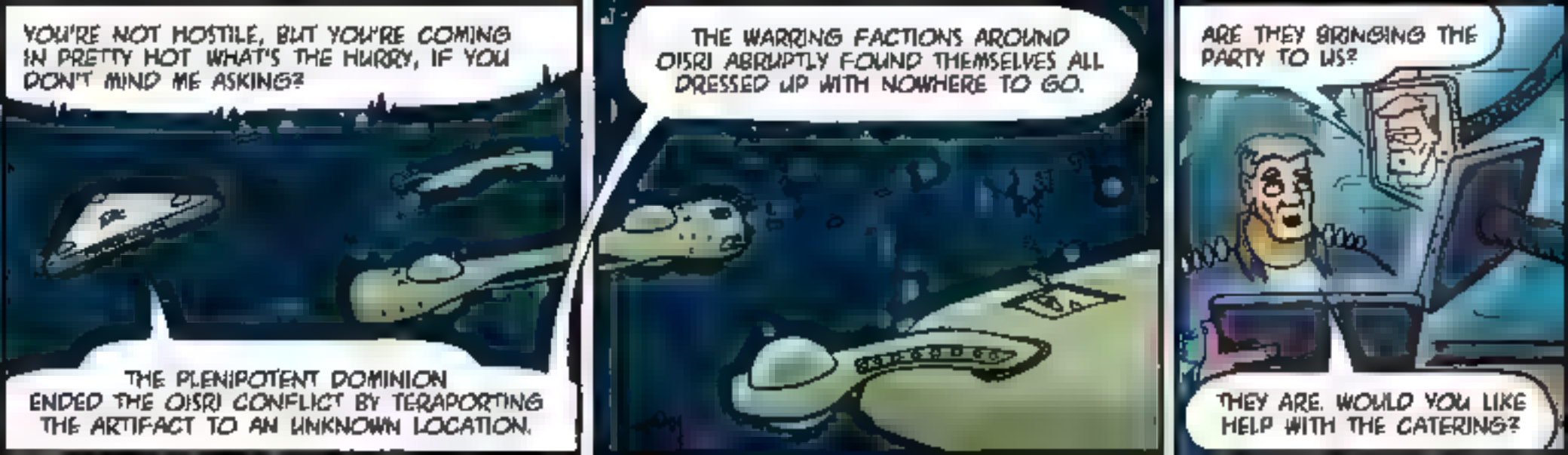
It would also tell the galaxy that I can instantly light up any seat of government that has a location-enabled hypernet feed.

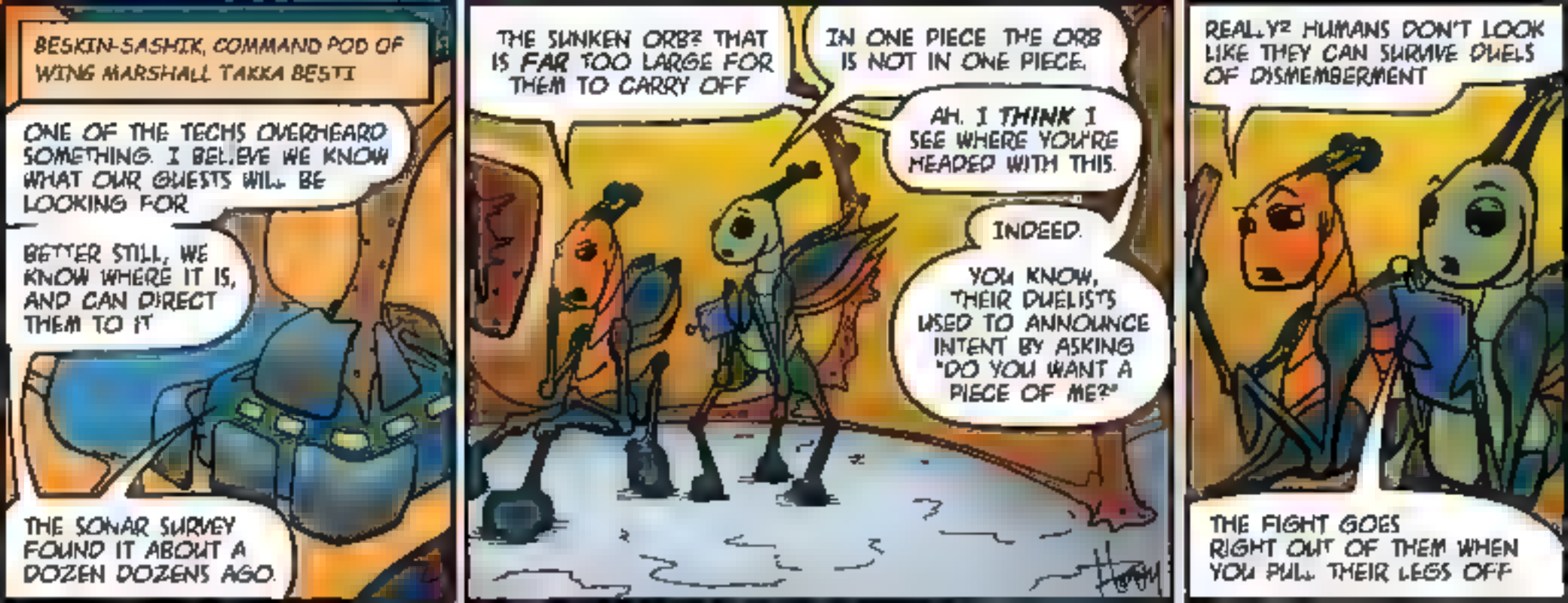
KEVYN HAS CONVINCED ME THAT THIS ISN'T A GOOD THING TO SAY.

Whether or not that's a good thing to say, it is MY thing to say, and I get to choose when to say it.

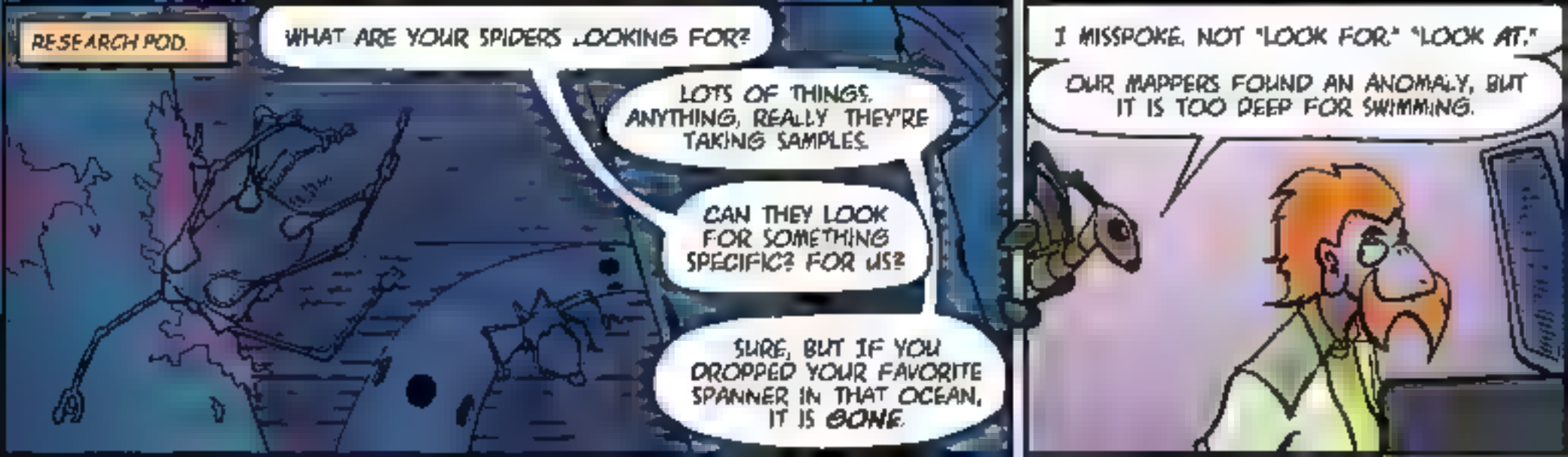
Your military historians have an apt aphorism: "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy."
EVERYONE HERE IS FAMILIAR WITH IT
A Tricorn-class Battleplate just teleported in at the edge of Bubble 3, and has begun a full-speed traversal.
THEY MIGHT NOT BE AN ENEMY.
THE BATTLE PLAN NO LONGER CARES, BECAUSE IT JUST DIED.

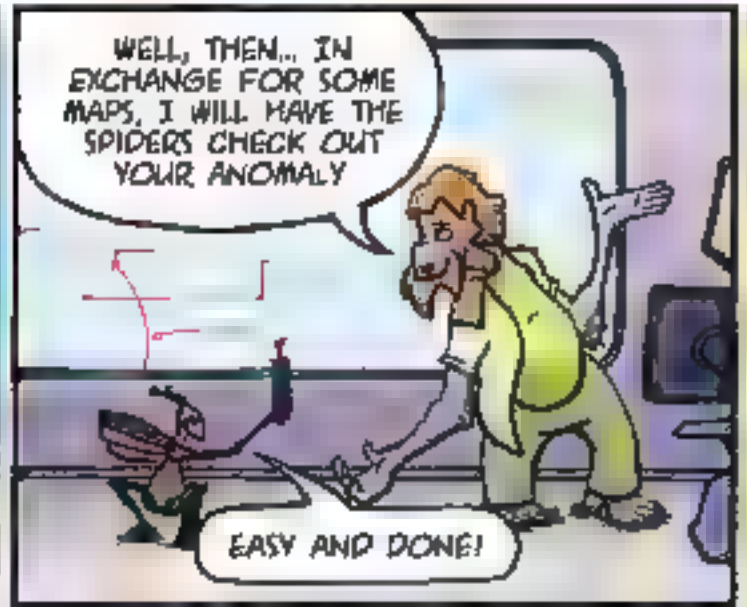

COMMODORE TAGON, I AM ADMIRAL DEVEREAUX, ABOARD THE U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE MANICOUAGAN.
WE HAVE ENTERED A SPHERE THAT YOU APPEAR TO BE SECURING. I APOLOGIZE FOR THE INTRUSION. OUR INTENT IS NOT HOSTILE. I REQUEST THAT WE BE TREATED AS FRIENDLIES.
"WE" BEING YOU AND THE BATTLEPLATE MANICOUAGAN?
PLUS CONSORT.
YOU BROUGHT A FLEET?
ONE OR TWO. SHALL WE PLEASE NOT FIGHT?


YOU'RE NOT HOSTILE, BUT YOU'RE COMING IN PRETTY HOT WHAT'S THE HURRY, IF YOU DON'T MIND ME ASKING?
THE PLENIPOTENT DOMINION ENDED THE OISRI CONFLICT BY TERAPORTING THE ARTIFACT TO AN UNKNOWN LOCATION.
THE WARRING FACTIONS AROUND OISRI ABRUPTLY FOUND THEMSELVES ALL DRESSED UP WITH NOWHERE TO GO.
ARE THEY BRINGING THE PARTY TO US?
THEY ARE. WOULD YOU LIKE HELP WITH THE CATERING?


BESKIN-SASHIK, COMMAND POD OF WING MARSHALL TAKKA BESTI
ONE OF THE TECHS OVERHEARD SOMETHING. I BELIEVE WE KNOW WHAT OUR GUESTS WILL BE LOOKING FOR
BETTER STILL, WE KNOW WHERE IT IS, AND CAN DIRECT THEM TO IT
THE SONAR SURVEY FOUND IT ABOUT A DOZEN DOZENS AGO.
THE SUNKEN ORB? THAT IS FAR TOO LARGE FOR THEM TO CARRY OFF
IN ONE PIECE THE ORB IS NOT IN ONE PIECE.
AH. I THINK I SEE WHERE YOU'RE HEADED WITH THIS.
INDEED.
YOU KNOW, THEIR DUELISTS USED TO ANNOUNCE INTENT BY ASKING "DO YOU WANT A PIECE OF ME?"
REALLY? HUMANS DON'T LOOK LIKE THEY CAN SURVIVE DUELS OF DISMEMBERMENT
THE FIGHT GOES RIGHT OUT OF THEM WHEN YOU PULL THEIR LEGS OFF

BRIEFING THE LIEUTENANTS..
THERE ARE THOSE IN OUR RANKS, PERHAPS EVEN AMONG YOURSELVES, WHO HARBOR DESPICABLE HERESY.
I REFUSE TO POLICE YOUR THOUGHTS, AND I AM AIDED IN THIS BY YOUR RELUCTANCE TO SHARE THEM.
SOMETIMES, HOWEVER, OUR PURITY CONFLICTS WITH OUR PROSPERITY
PLEASE NOTE I AM NOT CALLING FOR A PURGE
NOW, ROUND UP THE HERETICS.

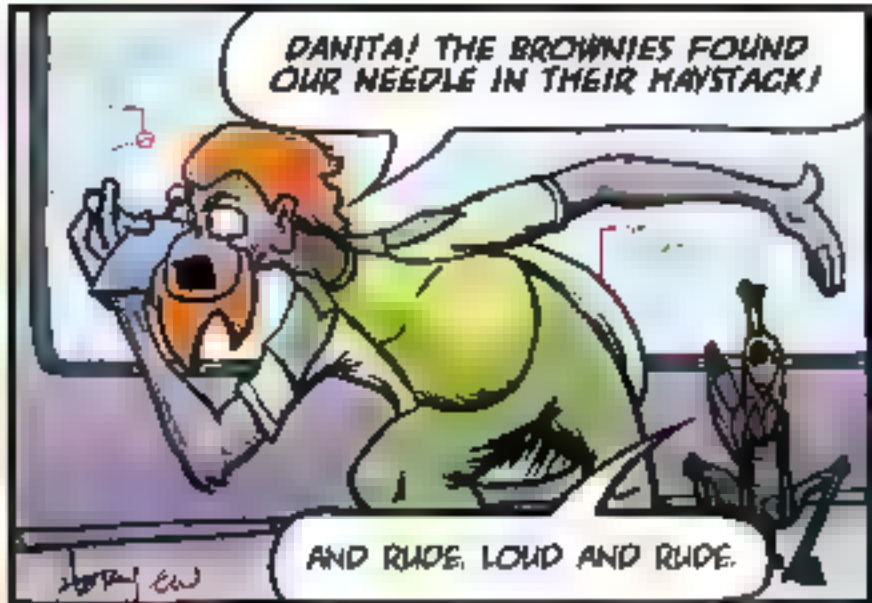

RESEARCH POD.
WHAT ARE YOUR SPIDERS LOOKING FOR?
LOTS OF THINGS. ANYTHING, REALLY. THEY'RE TAKING SAMPLES.
CAN THEY LOOK FOR SOMETHING SPECIFIC? FOR US?
SURE, BUT IF YOU DROPPED YOUR FAVORITE SPANNER IN THAT OCEAN, IT IS GONE.
I MISSPOKE. NOT "LOOK FOR." "LOOK AT."
OUR MAPPERS FOUND AN ANOMALY, BUT IT IS TOO DEEP FOR SWIMMING.

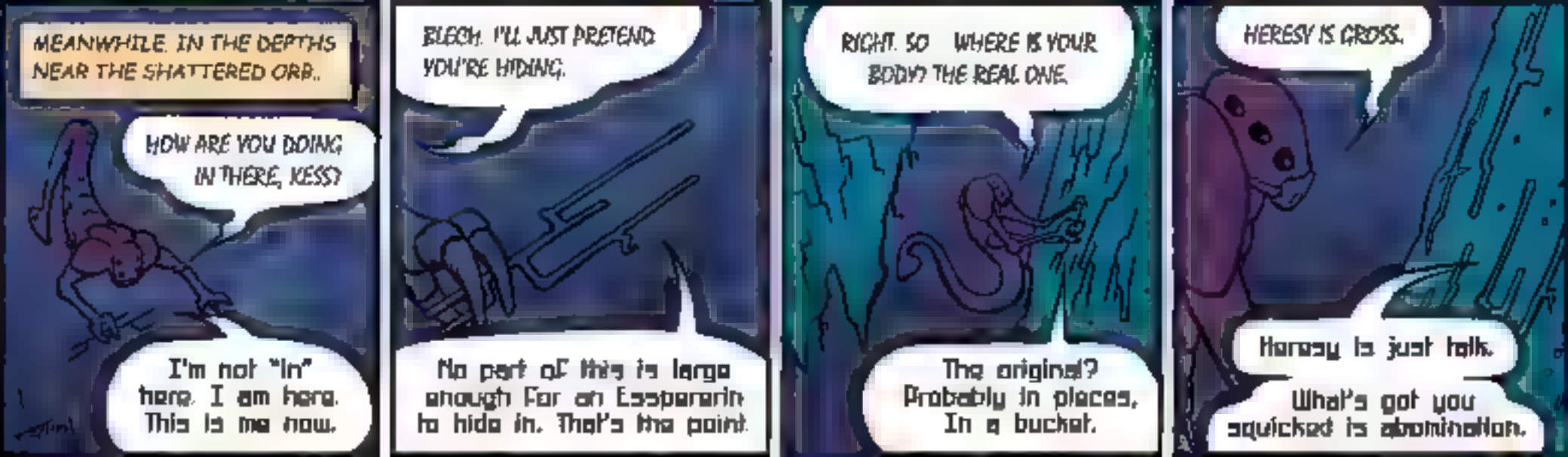
YOUR MAPPERS...
YOU HAVE MAPS?
OF COURSE.

WELL, THEN... IN EXCHANGE FOR SOME MAPS, I WILL HAVE THE SPIDERS CHECK OUT YOUR ANOMALY
EASY AND DONE!

TWO-METER RESOLUTION DOWN TO A THOUSAND KLICKS.. VERY NICE
I SHOULD HAVE ASKED ABOUT MAPS MUCH EARLIER.

THE ANOMALY IS ON TILE SIXTEEN.
YUP. RIGHT THERE. WE CALL IT "THE SUNKEN ORB" BECAUSE SOMEBODY IS LAZY AT NAMING THINGS.

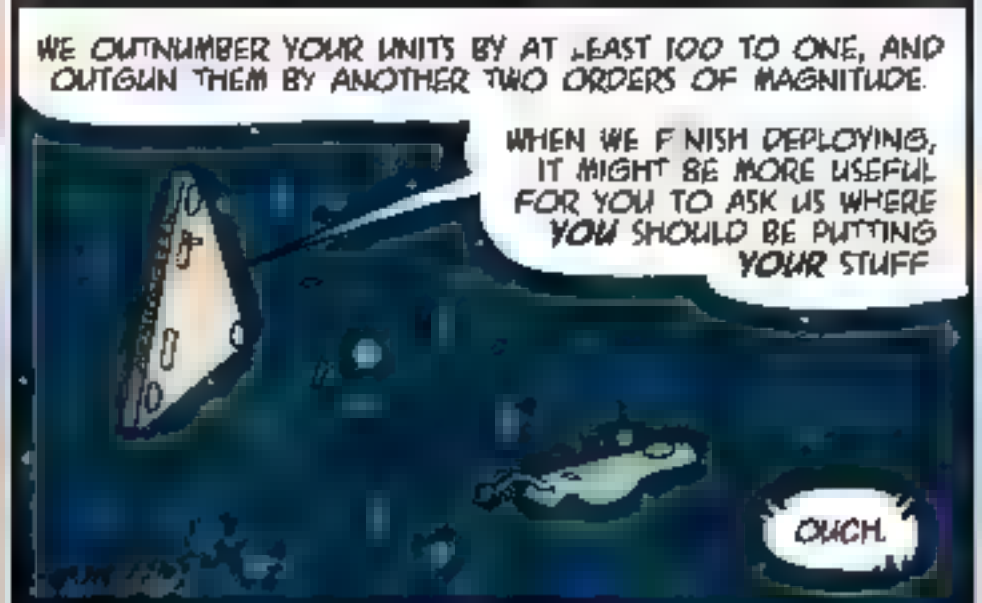
THAT FACE YOU ARE MAKING IS THE FACE THAT YOU MAKE JUST BEFORE YOU GET LOUD.


DANITA! THE BROWNIES FOUND OUR NEEDLE IN THEIR HAYSTACK!
AND RUDE. LOUD AND RUDE.

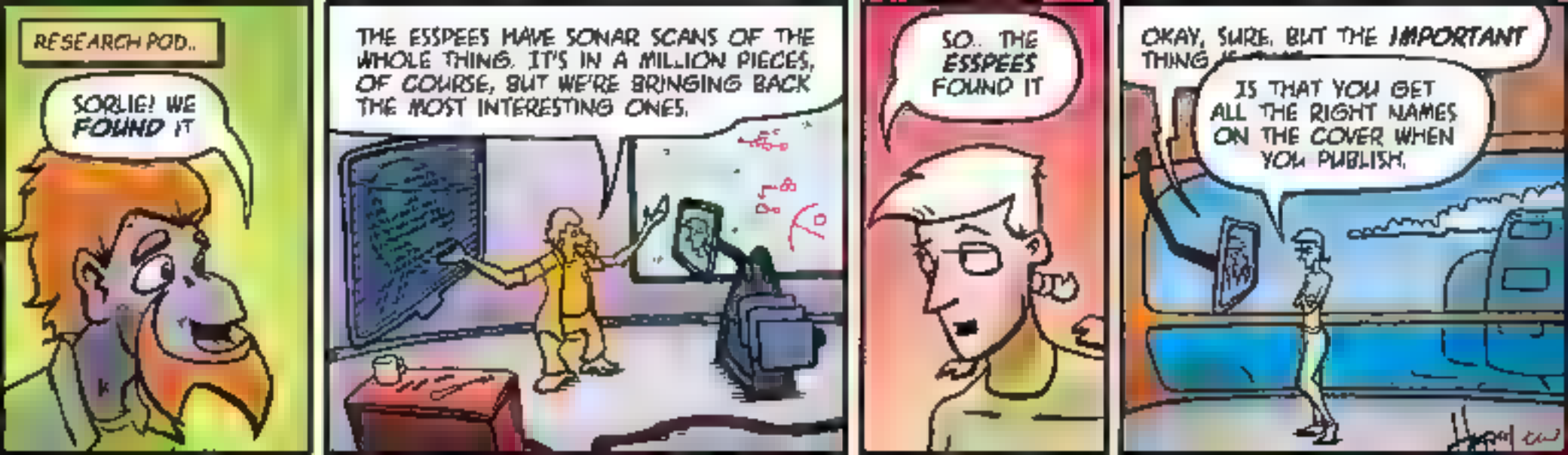

MEANWHILE. IN THE DEPTHS NEAR THE SHATTERED ORB..
HOW ARE YOU DOING IN THERE, KESS?
I'm not "in" here. I am here. This is me now.
BLECH. I'LL JUST PRETEND YOU'RE HIDING.
No part of this is large enough for an Esperarin to hide in. That's the point.
RIGHT. SO WHERE IS YOUR BODY? THE REAL ONE.
The original? Probably in pieces. In a bucket.
HERESY IS GROSS.
Heresy is just talk.
What's got you squicked is abomination.

IN ORBIT ABOVE ULI-OA..
MANICOUAGAN THIS IS CAPTAIN TAGON. WE HAVE CLEARED A LANE FOR YOU. WHAT'S YOUR ETA?
REALLY?
CAPTAIN TAGON?
THE CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON?
UMM.. YEAH?
BIG FAN, SIR.
YOU ARE REQUIRED READING THESE DAYS.
BUT.. I HAVEN'T WRITTEN ANYTHING.
SORRY, SIR. YOUR DOSSIER. IT'S AMAZING.
CAN I TALK TO SOMEONE WHO HASN'T READ IT, AND KNOWS YOUR ETA?

THE MANICOUAGAN WILL ENTER "BUBBLE ZERO" IN EIGHT HOURS AND SIX MINUTES.
VERY GOOD. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO DEPLOY WITHIN THE BUBBLES?


WE OUTNUMBER YOUR UNITS BY AT LEAST 100 TO ONE, AND OUTGUN THEM BY ANOTHER TWO ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE.
WHEN WE FINISH DEPLOYING, IT MIGHT BE MORE USEFUL FOR YOU TO ASK US WHERE YOU SHOULD BE PUTTING YOUR STUFF.
OUCH.

HEH. SORRY TO BURST YOUR BUBBLE.
OKAY, NOW OUCH.

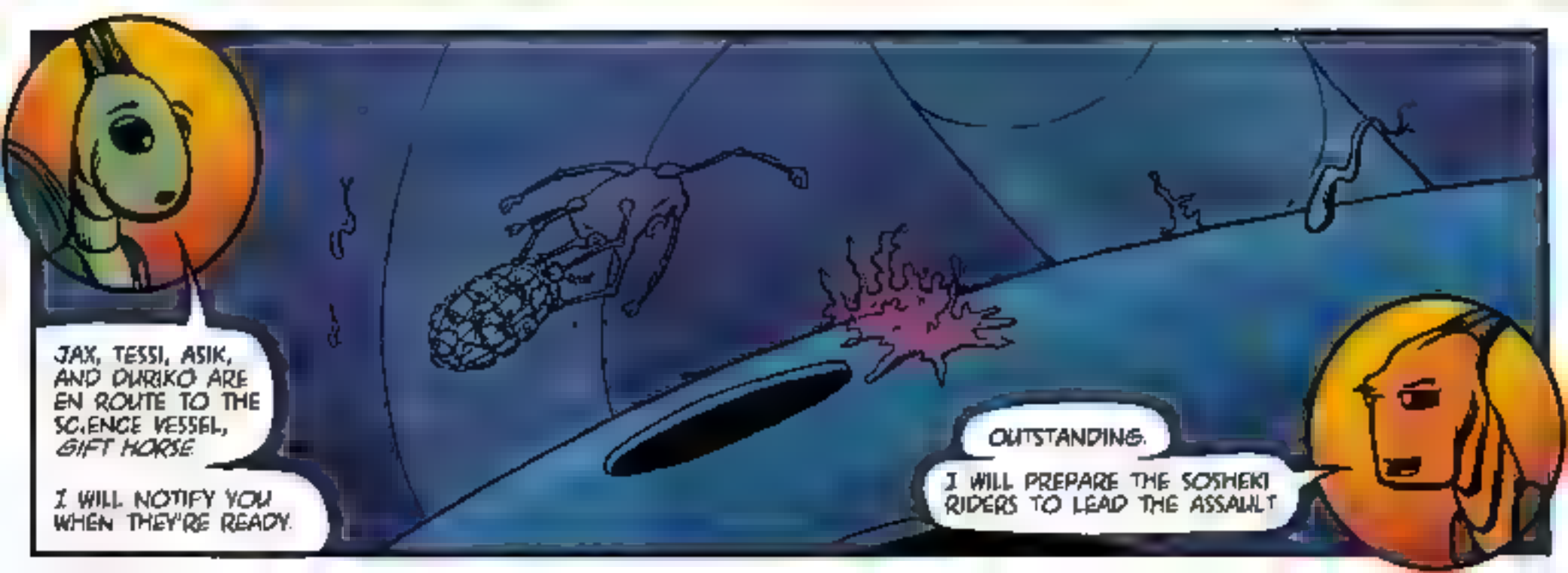

RESEARCH POD..
SORLIE! WE FOUND IT
THE ESSPEES HAVE SONAR SCANS OF THE WHOLE THING. IT'S IN A MILLION PIECES, OF COURSE, BUT WE'RE BRINGING BACK THE MOST INTERESTING ONES.
SO.. THE ESSPEES FOUND IT
OKAY, SURE. BUT THE IMPORTANT THING
IS THAT YOU GET ALL THE RIGHT NAMES ON THE COVER WHEN YOU PUBLISH.

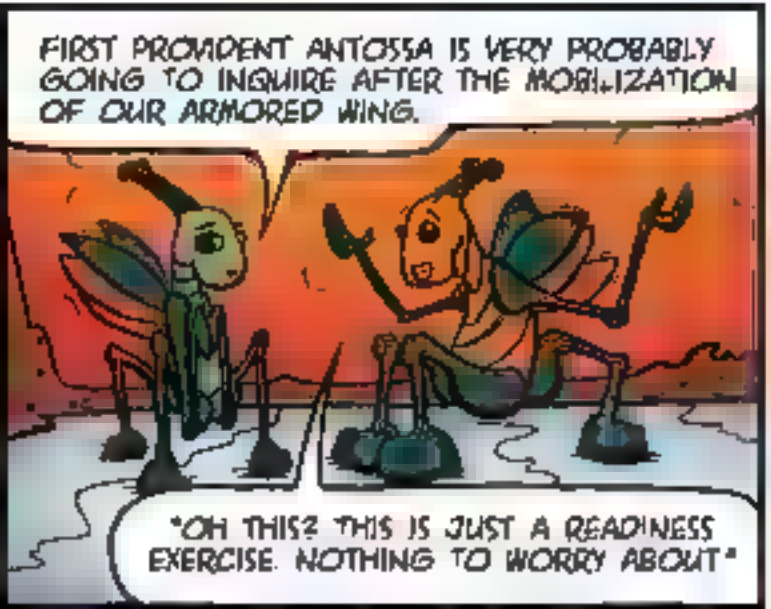
CHINOOK, CAN YOU SEND ME SOME IMAGES FROM THE SPIDERS? I WANT TO LOOK AT THE STUFF THEY'RE BRINGING BACK.
More eyes might help. None of the researchers have figured out what they're looking at.
THAT'S A JOB FOR AN ENGINEER. THE ANSWER USUALLY LIES IN WHAT THE THING LOOKS *LIKE*.
So... what does it look like, Captain Sorlie?
SIX LENGTHS OF CONDUIT DROWNED WHILE FIGHTING OVER A FRUIT BASKET

RESEARCH POD.
BAD NEWS. THE SAMPLES FROM THE ORB ARE GOING STRAIGHT TO GIFT HORSE, IN CASE WE HAVE TO LEAVE IN A HURRY..
THAT'S FINE.
LESS NOISE HERE MAKES IT EASIER TO THINK.
MMM. THE PICTURES.
THAT ONE'S BAFFLING.
IT'S LIKE A LIFE-SUPPORT MANIFOLD GIVING BIRTH TO A SPORTING GOODS STORE.
LESS NOISE HERE MAKES IT EASIER TO THINK

BESKIN-SASHIK WING MARSHAL'S COMMAND POD.
FIVE OF OUR AGENTS HAVE BEEN PICKED UP AS "SAMPLES" BY THE SPIDERS.
ARE THEY IN PLACE YET?

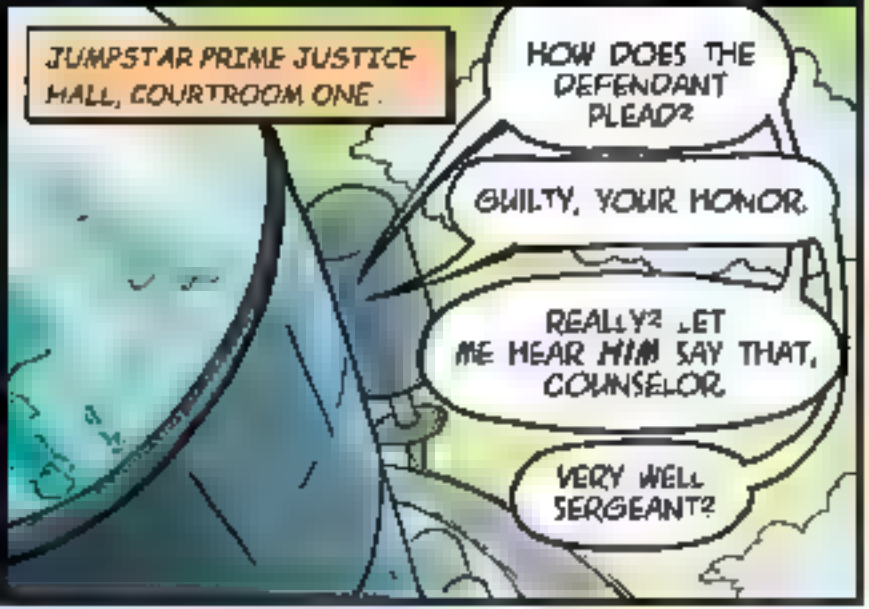
KESS IS IN THE QUARANTINE AREA ABOARD THE CARGO SHIP CINDERCONE. SHE IS OUR ONLY AGENT IN PLACE ON THAT VESSEL.


JAX, TESSI, ASIK, AND DURIKO ARE EN ROUTE TO THE SCIENCE VESSEL, GIFT HORSE.
I WILL NOTIFY YOU WHEN THEY'RE READY.
OUTSTANDING.
I WILL PREPARE THE SOSHEKI RIDERS TO LEAD THE ASSAULT.

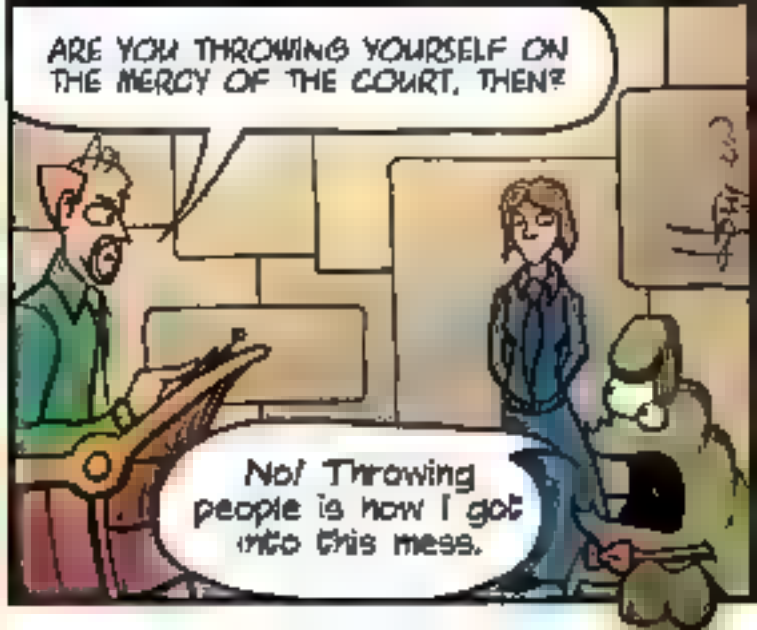

FIRST PROVIDENT ANTOSSA IS VERY PROBABLY GOING TO INQUIRE AFTER THE MOBILIZATION OF OUR ARMORED WING.
"OH THIS? THIS IS JUST A READINESS EXERCISE. NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT."

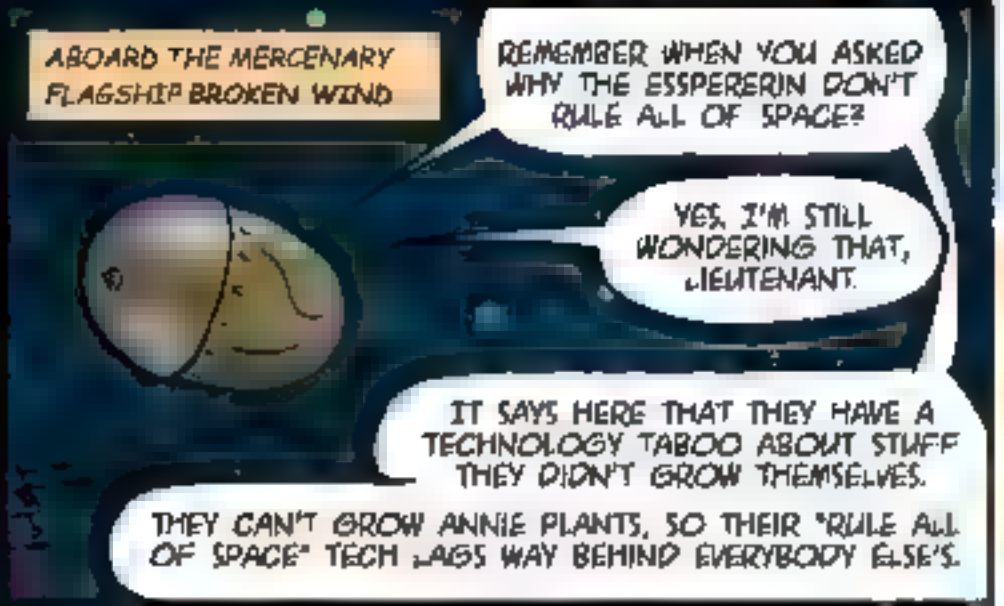
WE'LL NEED TO GLUE YOUR WING-CASES AGAIN IF THAT'S HOW YOU'RE PLANNING TO SAY IT.

I'M PLANNING TO HAVE YOU SAY IT. I DON'T WANT TO BE STICKY DURING BATTLE.


JUMPSTAR PRIME JUSTICE HALL, COURTROOM ONE.
HOW DOES THE DEFENDANT PLEAD?
GUILTY, YOUR HONOR.
REALLY? LET ME HEAR HIM SAY THAT, COUNSELOR.
VERY WELL SERGEANT?

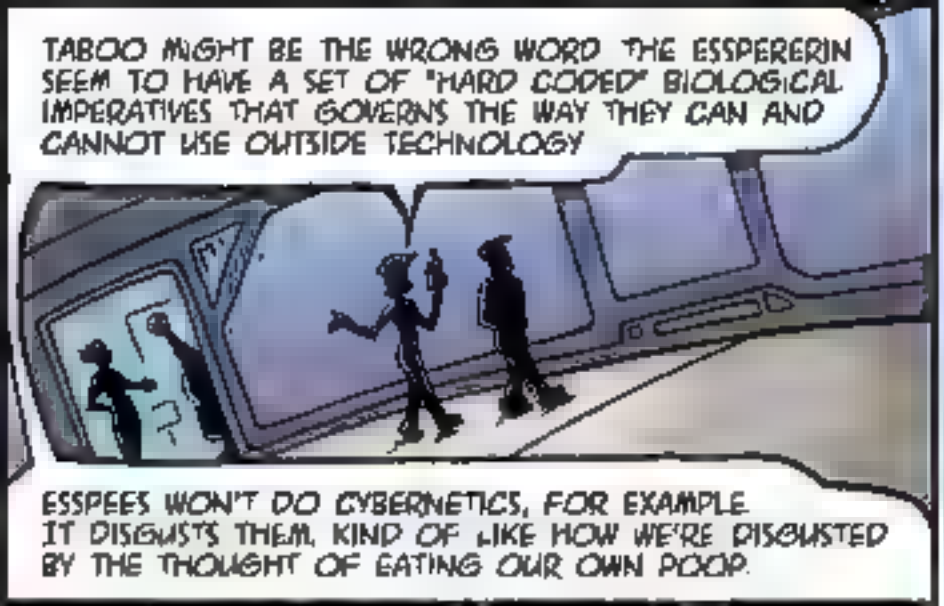
I'm guilty. But I don't want to be. It feels icky.


ARE YOU THROWING YOURSELF ON THE MERCY OF THE COURT, THEN?
No! Throwing people is how I got into this mess.

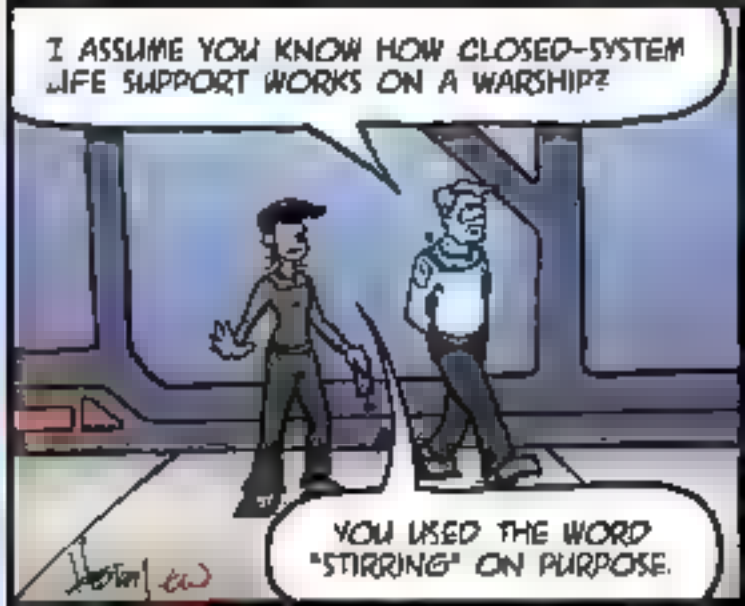

ABOARD THE MERCENARY FLAGSHIP BROKEN WIND
REMEMBER WHEN YOU ASKED WHY THE ESSPERERIN DON'T RULE ALL OF SPACE?
YES, I'M STILL WONDERING THAT, LIEUTENANT.
IT SAYS HERE THAT THEY HAVE A TECHNOLOGY TABOO ABOUT STUFF THEY DIDN'T GROW THEMSELVES.
THEY CAN'T GROW ANNIE PLANTS, SO THEIR "RULE ALL OF SPACE" TECH LAGS WAY BEHIND EVERYBODY ELSE'S.

THERE WERE ANNIE PLANTS ON THE OSHKA-KREE PIRATE SHIP WE FOUGHT IN CELESCHUL.
THE OSHKA-KREE ARE ESSPERERIN PIRATES.

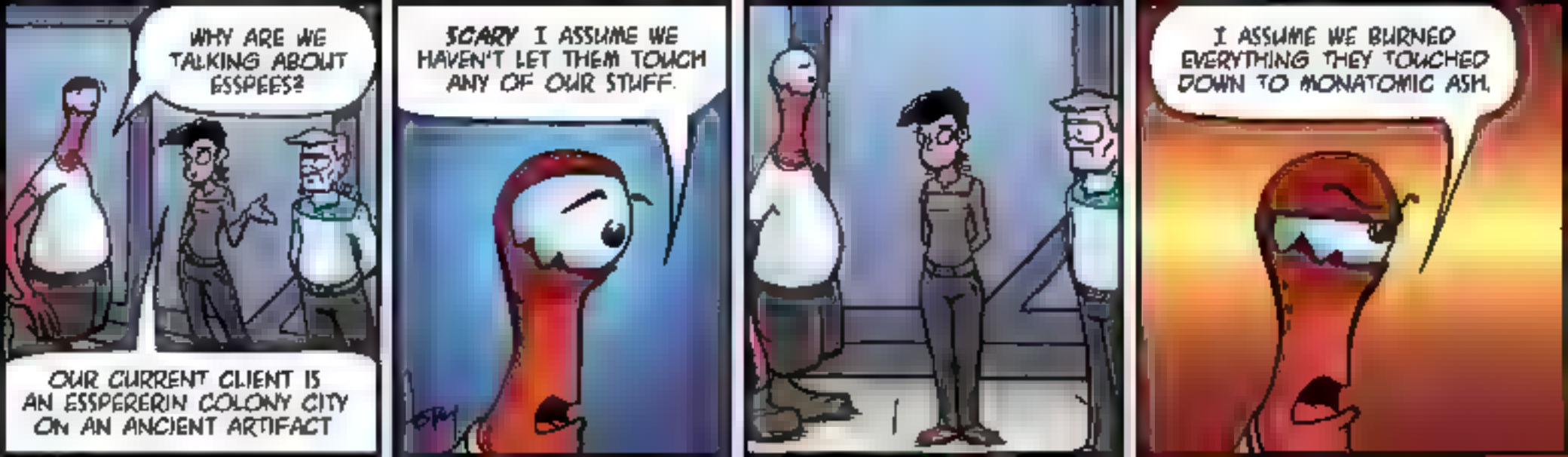
NEW QUESTION: WHY DON'T THE ESSPERERIN PIRATES RULE ALL OF SPACE?


TABOO MIGHT BE THE WRONG WORD. THE ESSPEREERIN SEEM TO HAVE A SET OF "HARD CODED" BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES THAT GOVERNS THE WAY THEY CAN AND CANNOT USE OUTSIDE TECHNOLOGY.
ESSPEES WON'T DO CYBERNETICS, FOR EXAMPLE. IT DISGUSTS THEM, KIND OF LIKE HOW WE'RE DISGUSTED BY THE THOUGHT OF EATING OUR OWN POOP.

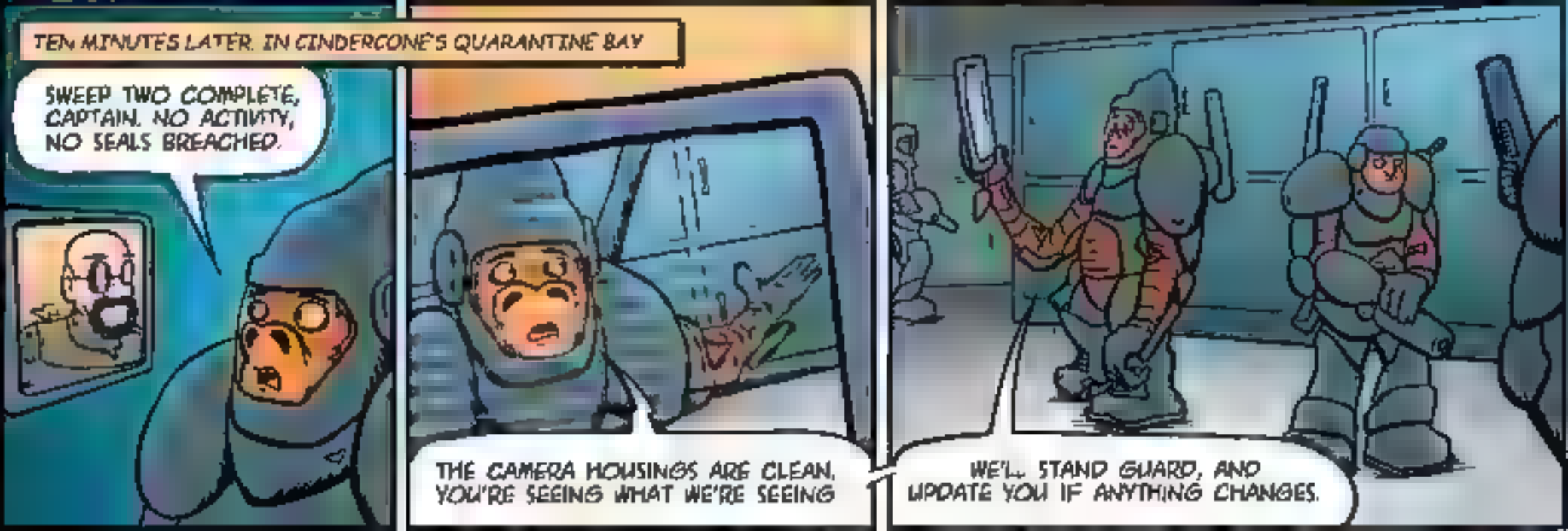
THAT'S A STIRRING COMPARISON. VERY EVOCATIVE.

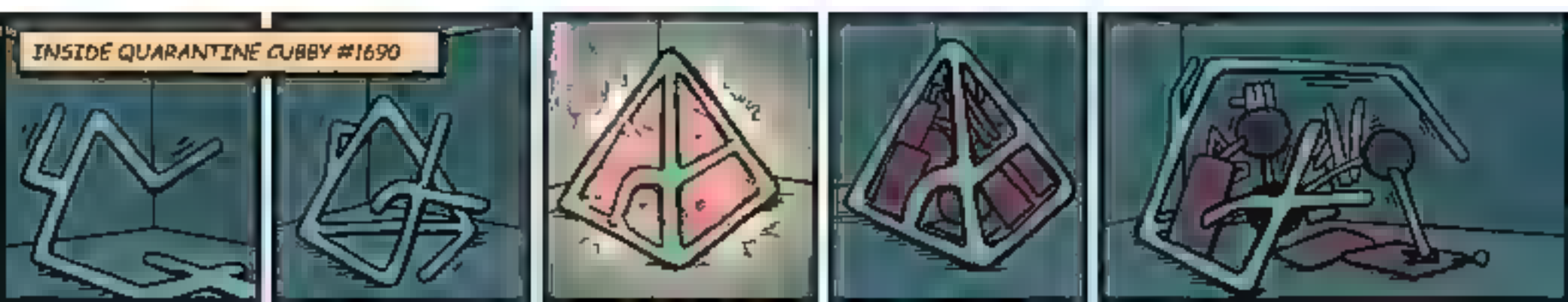

I ASSUME YOU KNOW HOW CLOSED-SYSTEM LIFE SUPPORT WORKS ON A WARSHIP?
YOU USED THE WORD "STIRRING" ON PURPOSE.

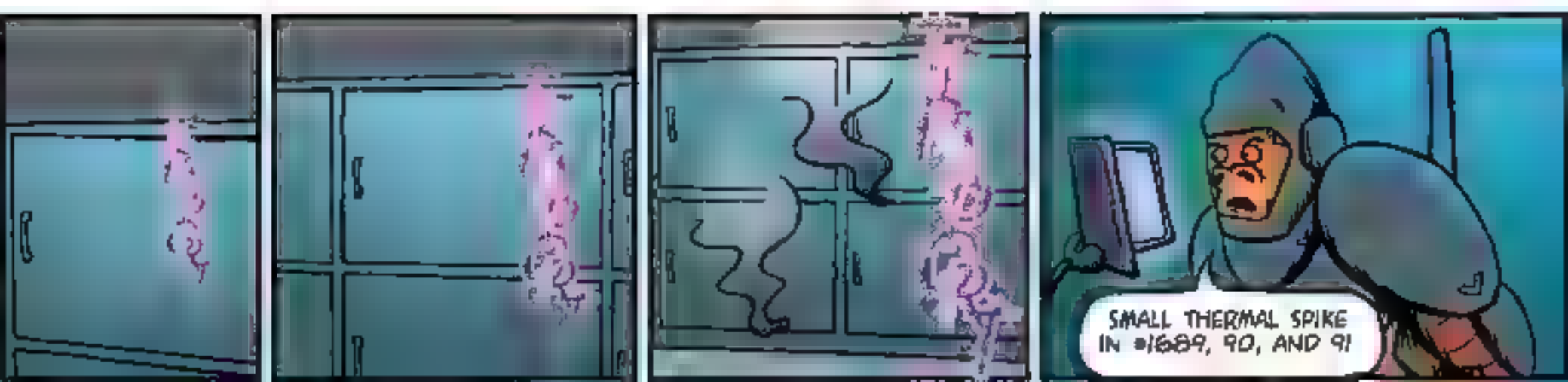
THAT STILL DOESN'T EXPLAIN THE ESSPEE PIRATES. THEY USED TOP-NOTCH MILITARY TOOLS.
THEY WERE AN ABERRATION. AN ESSPEE PURITECHNOLOGIAN WOULD ARGUE THAT THEY WERE DISEASED, AND THAT THEIR DEFEAT WAS INEVITABLE.
IF WE HADN'T BEATEN THEM, THEY WOULD EVENTUALLY HAVE DESTROYED THEMSELVES, THEIR VERY BODIES RIPPING APART IN REVULSION AT THE ABOMINATIONS THEY'D BECOME.
EBBY! YOU'RE TALKING AGAIN!
FEELS GOOD. SO GOOD THAT IT'S ACTUALLY HARD TO STOP ONCE I GET STARTED. IN FACT, I THINK
GOT IT. WELCOME BACK, COMMANDER.

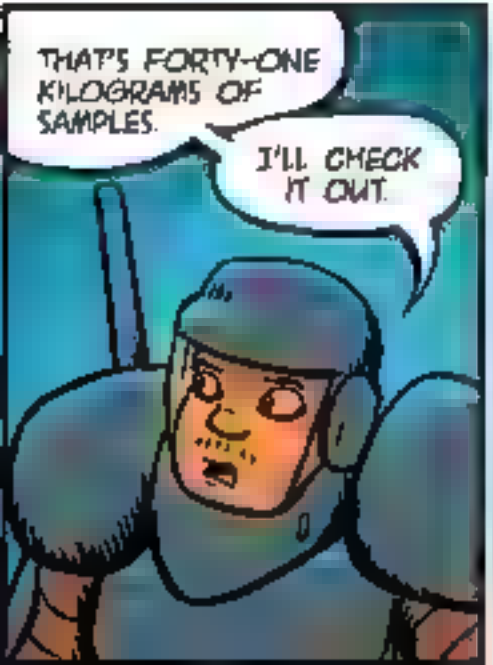

WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT ESSPEES?
OUR CURRENT CLIENT IS AN ESSPERERIN COLONY CITY ON AN ANCIENT ARTIFACT
SCARY I ASSUME WE HAVEN'T LET THEM TOUCH ANY OF OUR STUFF.
I ASSUME WE BURNED EVERYTHING THEY TOUCHED DOWN TO MONATOMIC ASH.

ONE PANICKED LECTURE LATER.
CAPTAINS! DEPLOY ARMED TEAMS IMMEDIATELY HIGH ALERT, FULL KIT. THEY ARE TO COVER EVERYTHING THE ESSPEES HAVE TOUCHED
THAT MEANS THE RESEARCH POD, THE SPIDERS, AND WHATEVER THE SPIDERS HAVE TOUCHED. ESPECIALLY ANYTHING THEY CARRIED ABOARD OUR SHIPS.
YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS.
HAPPY NOW?
I MISSED THE PART WHERE YOU TOLD THEM TO BURN IT AL... THAT'S THE HAPPY PART


TEN MINUTES LATER. IN CINDERCONE'S QUARANTINE BAY
SWEEP TWO COMPLETE, CAPTAIN. NO ACTIVITY, NO SEALS BREACHED.
THE CAMERA HOUSINGS ARE CLEAN. YOU'RE SEEING WHAT WE'RE SEEING
WE'LL STAND GUARD, AND UPDATE YOU IF ANYTHING CHANGES.

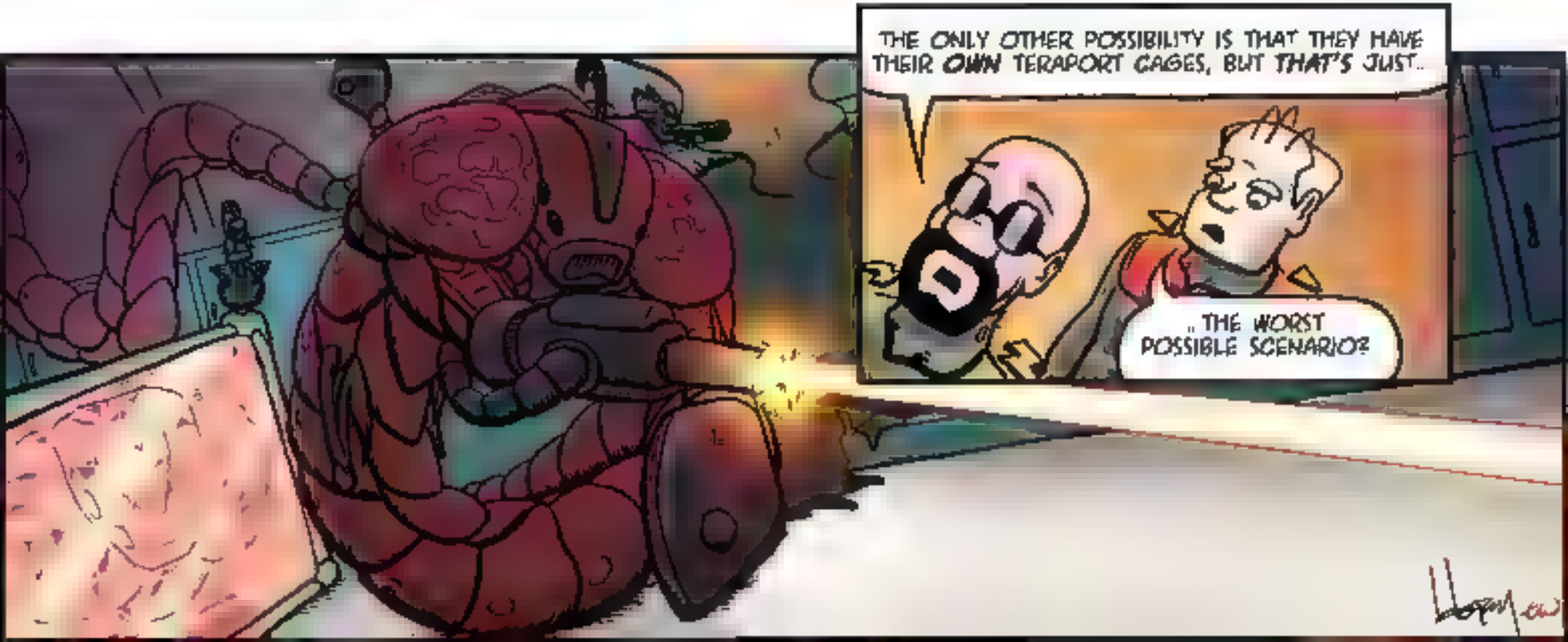

INSIDE QUARANTINE CUBBY #1690

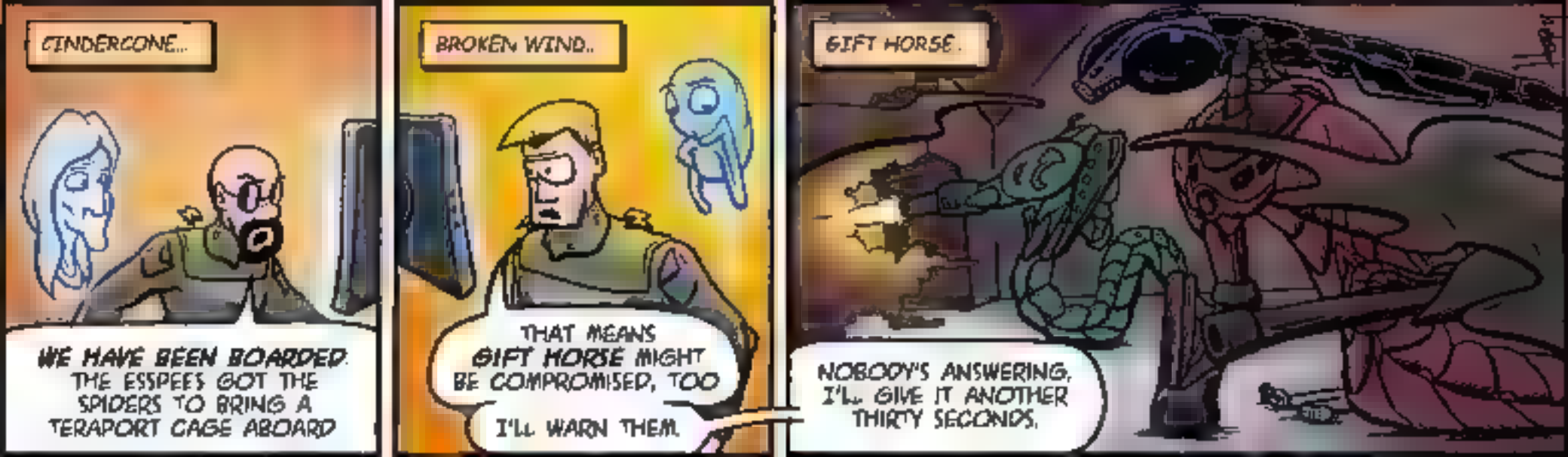

SMALL THERMAL SPIKE IN #1689, 90, AND 91


THAT'S FORTY-ONE KILOGRAMS OF SAMPLES.
I'LL CHECK IT OUT.

WHATEVER'S GOING ON IN THERE, IT'S NOT VERY BIG.
640 1650

COMMAND DECK, CINDERCONE.
WEAPONS HOT! GIANT ESSPERERIN ARMOR-SUIT!
MOTHER OF CHROME, TWO MORE! FALL BACK AND LIGHT UP THE WHOLE ROOM.
ANOTHER TWO!?!
HOW ARE THEY GETTING IN?
COULD THEY BE HIJACKING YOUR TERAPORT CAGES, SIR?
NOT A CHANCE. THEY DON'T HAVE THE OTHER END.


THE ONLY OTHER POSSIBILITY IS THAT THEY HAVE THEIR OWN TERAPORT CAGES, BUT THAT'S JUST..
.. THE WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO?

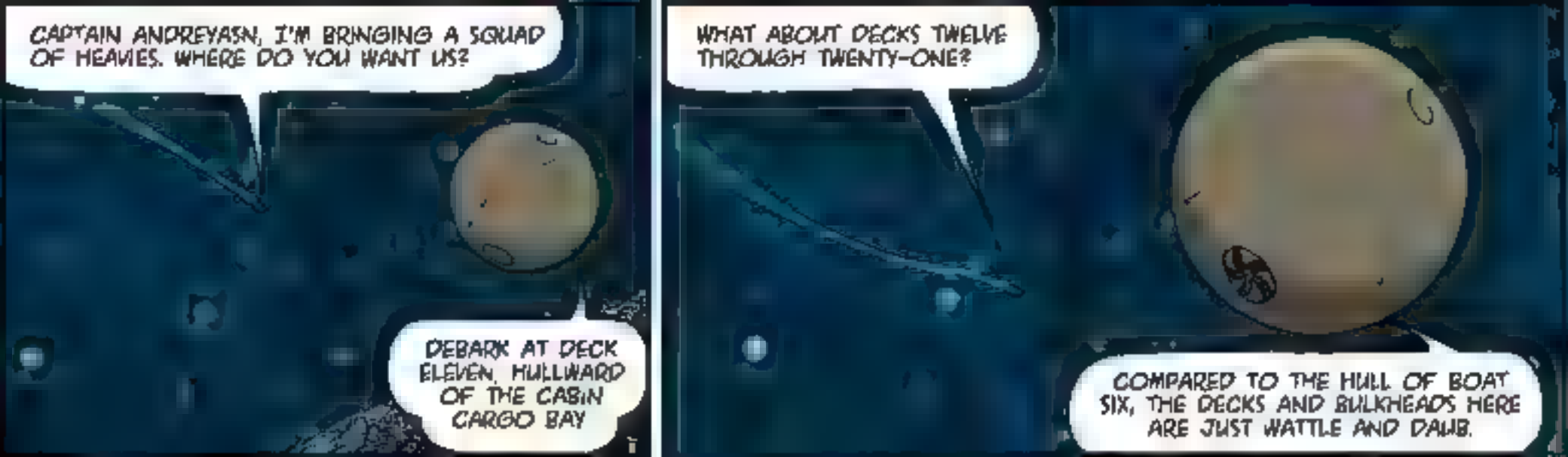

CINDERCONE...
WE HAVE BEEN BOARDED. THE ESSPEES GOT THE SPIDERS TO BRING A TERAPORT CAGE ABOARD
BROKEN WIND..
THAT MEANS GIFT HORSE MIGHT BE COMPROMISED, TOO
I'LL WARN THEM.
GIFT HORSE.
NOBODY'S ANSWERING. I'LL GIVE IT ANOTHER THIRTY SECONDS.

GIFT HORSE.
THE VESSEL IS OURS, WING MARSHAL.
IS ITS TERAPORT AUTHENTICATION STILL VALID? CAN WE 'PORT IT OUT OF HERE?
THE PRIZE CREW NAVIGATOR SAYS YES.
THEN GET US OUT NOW.
BROKEN WIND...
AT LEAST THEY'RE NOT STEALING OUR STUFF
YET.

The Eggpee teleport cage is resonating in weird ways with some of the conduits in my hull.
GIVE ME SOMETHING MORE SPECIFIC THAN "WEIRD WAYS," CINDY.
It tickles.
I'M SORRY
WHEN I SAID "SPECIFIC" I MEANT "USEFUL."

I can't quite block their cages, but I can tell you where they are.
GET THAT TO SHODAN'S ARMOR PLATOON. HE IS NOW AUTHORIZED TO DESTROY DECKS AND BULKHEADS.
YOU SAID "CAGES."
PLURAL.
Yes. Two.
And now three.
HE IS NOW UNDER ORDERS TO DESTROY DECKS AND BULKHEADS.

BROKEN WIND.
THEIR BEACH HEAD IS GETTING BIGGER. THEY'RE BRINGING MORE TERAPORT CAGES IN.
WHERE'S MURTAUGH? I WANT HER TO TAKE BOAT SIX, AND LEAD A COUNTER-ATTACK.
I'M IN BOAT SIX, COMMODORE.
ANTICIPATING YOUR ORDERS.
OUTSTANDING.
I HAVE YOUR HONOR GUARD WITH ME.
THAT WAS A TAD PRESUMPTIVE, BUT YOU CAN GO WITH MY BLESSING.


CAPTAIN ANDREYASN, I'M BRINGING A SQUAD OF HEAVIES. WHERE DO YOU WANT US?
DEBARK AT DECK ELEVEN, HULLWARD OF THE CABIN CARGO BAY
WHAT ABOUT DECKS TWELVE THROUGH TWENTY-ONE?
COMPARED TO THE HULL OF BOAT SIX, THE DECKS AND BULKHEADS HERE ARE JUST WATTLE AND DAUB.

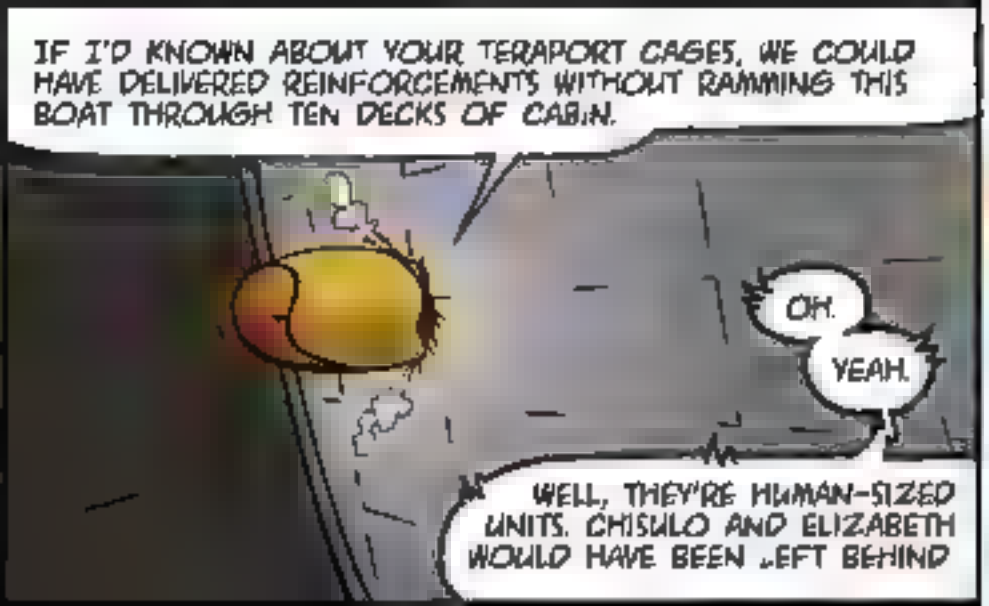
I NEED TO CONFIRM SOMETHING, CAPTAIN.
ARE YOU ASKING US TO RAM CINDERCONE'S CABIN SUPERSTRUCTURE, AND EMBED BOAT SIX TO A DEPTH OF ROUGHLY FIFTY METERS?
CONFIRMED.
AND HURRY THE ESSPEES HAVE CUT US OFF FROM THAT SECTION. THEY'RE CURRENTLY BETWEEN SHODAN'S TEAMS AND MY LAB.
YOUR LAB? SANCTUM MAIORI EXCREMENTUM... WHAT MISCHIEF COULD THEY WREAK IN THERE?

I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT *MISCHIEF*. I'M WORRIED ABOUT AN *INVASION*.

I'VE GOT TWO TERAPORT CAGES IN THERE. ONE OF THEM GOES TO FABBER TWO ABOARD BROKEN WIND, AND THE OTHER WILL TAKE THEM BACK TO MY *HOUSE*.

YOUR HOUSE IS JUST TWO PODS NORTH OF *MY* HOUSE.

AND THAT'S WHY I SAID "INVASION" INSTEAD OF "UNSOLICITED INTERIOR DECORATING."

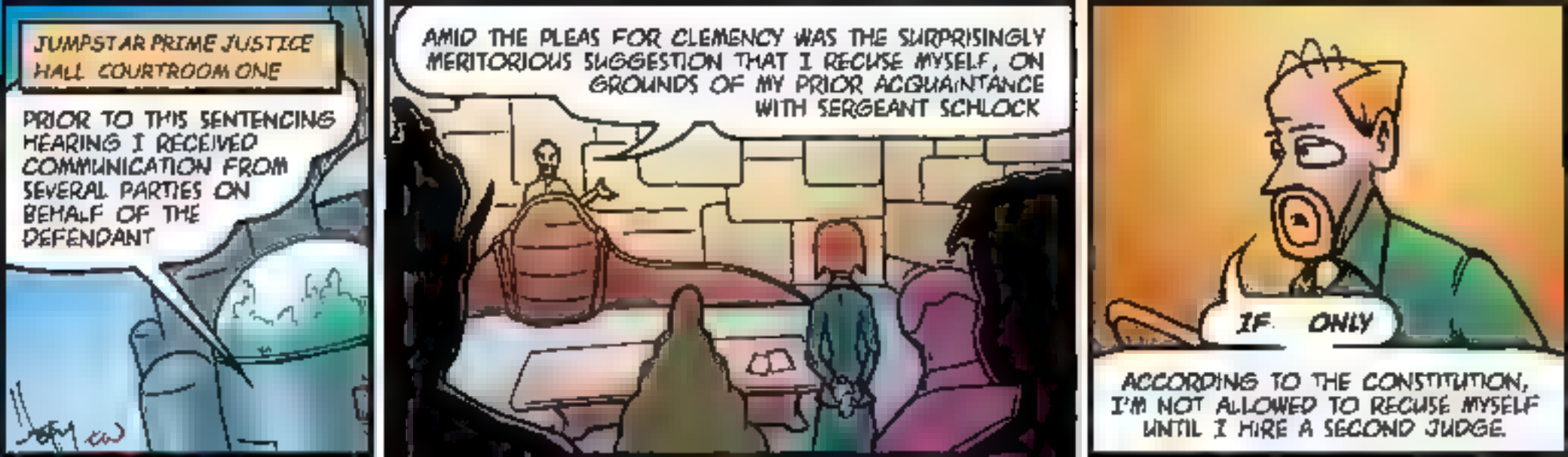

IF I'D KNOWN ABOUT YOUR TERAPORT CAGES, WE COULD HAVE DELIVERED REINFORCEMENTS WITHOUT RAMMING THIS BOAT THROUGH TEN DECKS OF CABIN.
OH.
YEAH.
WELL, THEY'RE HUMAN-SIZED UNITS. CHISULO AND ELIZABETH WOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT BEHIND

YOU LITTLE FOLK NEED TO THINK BIGGER WHEN YOU BUILD STUFF

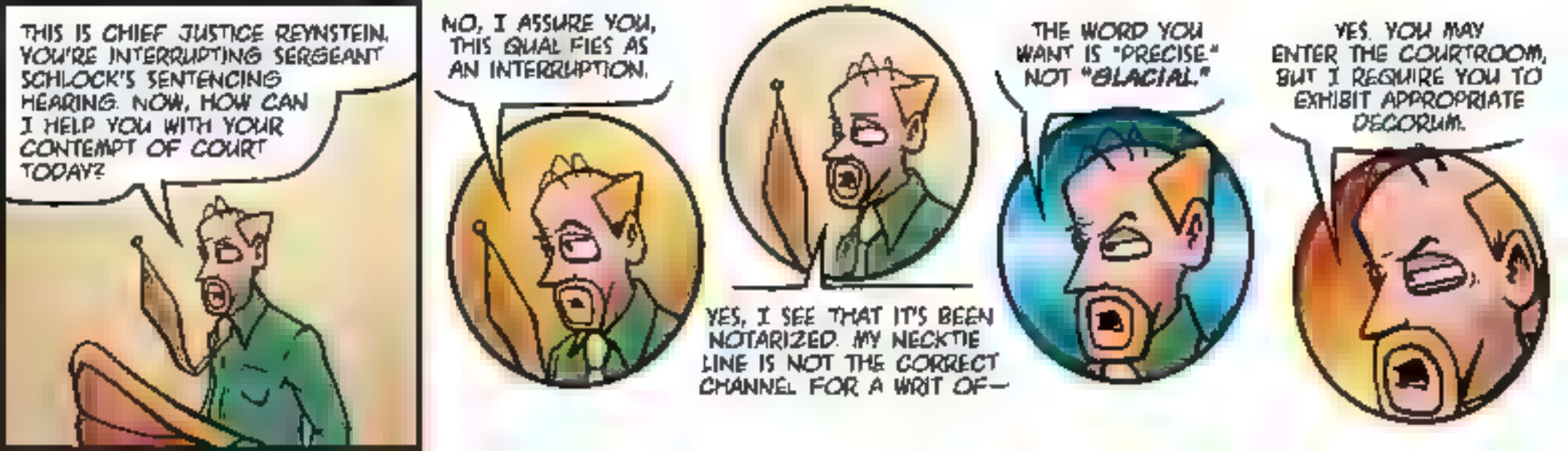
WE'RE RETROFITTING CINDERCONE WITH AN ANGRY, COMBAT READY ELEVATOR JUST FOR YOU TWO.
REALLY? THAT SOUNDS COOL.
SHE'S TALKING ABOUT THE RAMMING OPERATION, CHISULO.
NOW IT SOUNDS AWESOME.

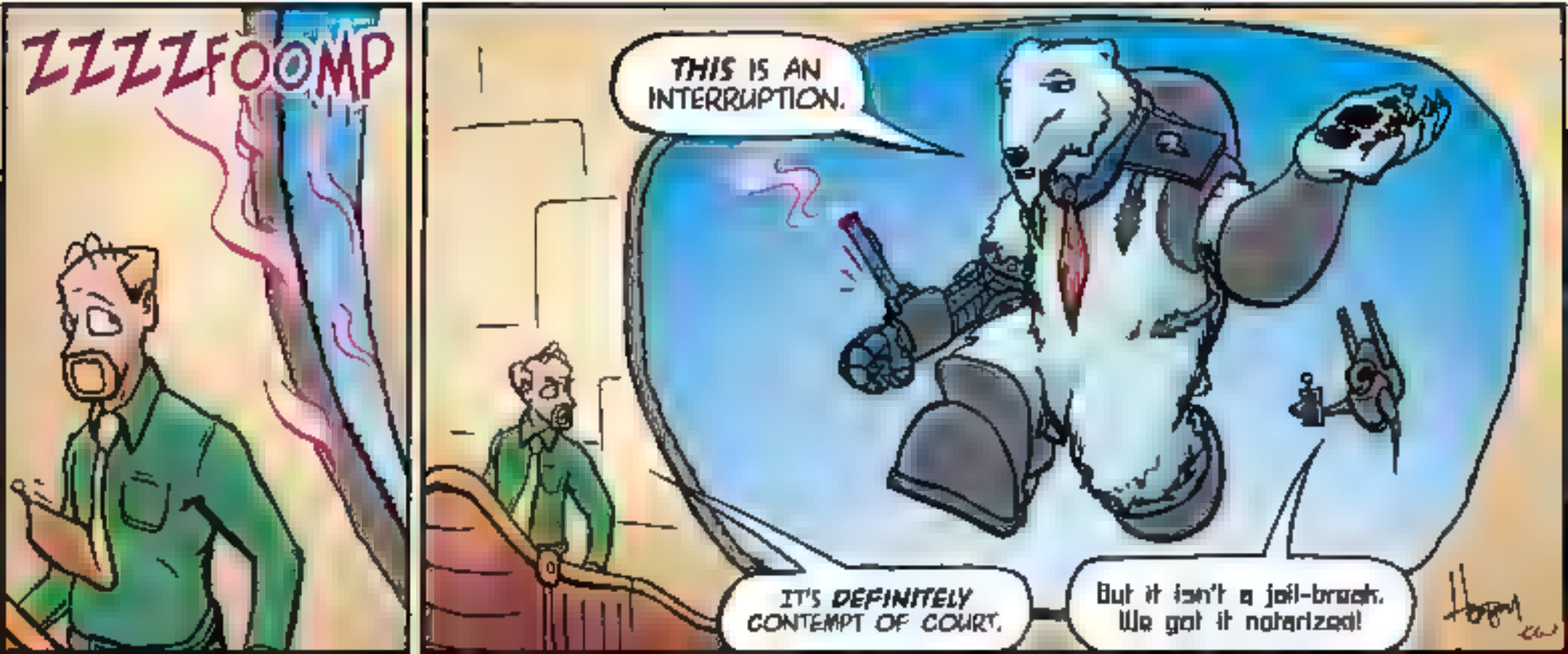
WE HAVE TO STOP THEM HERE. PAULDRONES LOOSE WEAPONS HOT CHISULO, YOU'RE FIRST.
THAT'S HOW I LIKE IT.
Y'KNOW, IF WE REALLY WANT TO STOP AN INVASION, YOU SHOULD CALL HOME AND HAVE SOMEBODY SMASH THE OTHER GATE.
BACK AT HOME.
BEEPLE-DEEP
URHHH.
THIZ BET'R BE IMPORTN'T.

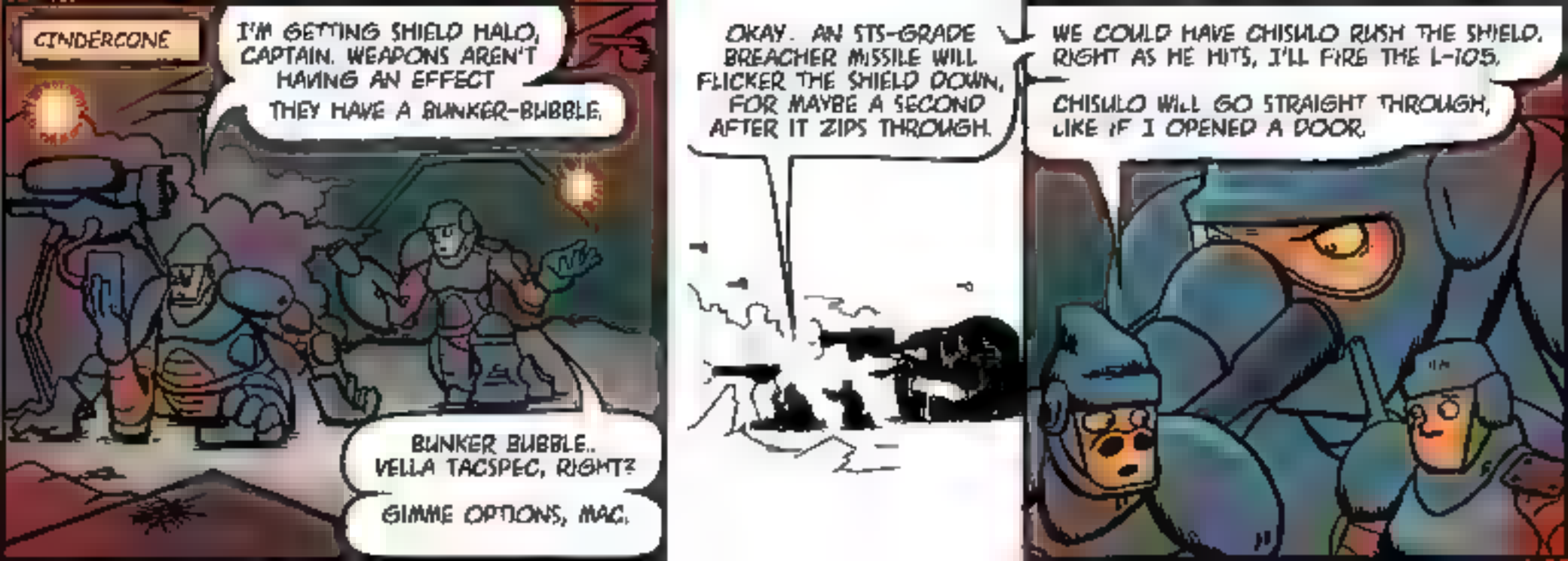
BROKEN WIND.
HULLNUTS.
CAPTAIN ANDREYASN HAS A TERAPORT CAGE IN FABBER TWO.
I'VE SEEN IT
THE OTHER END IS ON CINDERCONE, AND COULD FALL INTO ENEMY HANDS ANY MINUTE.
I'M ON IT COMMODORE, YOU HAVE THE CONN.
CAPTAIN MURTAUGH HAS OUR HEAVIES.
BUT WE DO STILL HAVE ME.


JUMPSTAR PRIME JUSTICE HALL COURTROOM ONE
PRIOR TO THIS SENTENCING HEARING I RECEIVED COMMUNICATION FROM SEVERAL PARTIES ON BEHALF OF THE DEFENDANT
AMID THE PLEAS FOR CLEMENCY WAS THE SURPRISINGLY MERITORIOUS SUGGESTION THAT I RECUSE MYSELF, ON GROUNDS OF MY PRIOR ACQUAINTANCE WITH SERGEANT SCHLOCK
IF ONLY
ACCORDING TO THE CONSTITUTION, I'M NOT ALLOWED TO RECUSE MYSELF UNTIL I HIRE A SECOND JUDGE.

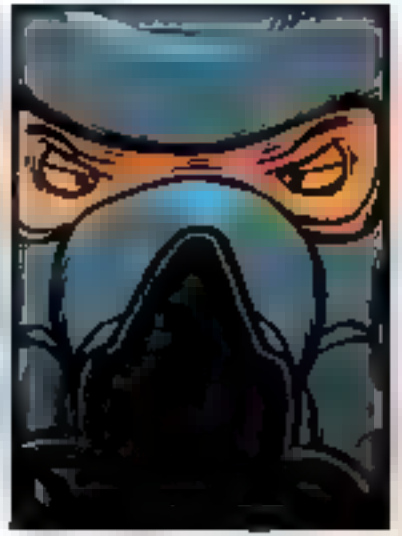
URGENT CALL FOR YOU, CHIEF JUSTICE.
MADAME CHINOOK, COURT IS IN SESSION.
MADAME?
M'LADY OF SKY AND SCREE?
OKAY, WHAT?
I WANT TO SHOW SOME TITULAR RESPECT WHEN TELLING THE GODDESS OF EARTH, WIND, AND PLUMBING TO PLEASE TAKE A MESSAGE, I'M BUSY.
NOTED. TAKE THE CALL, MASSEY

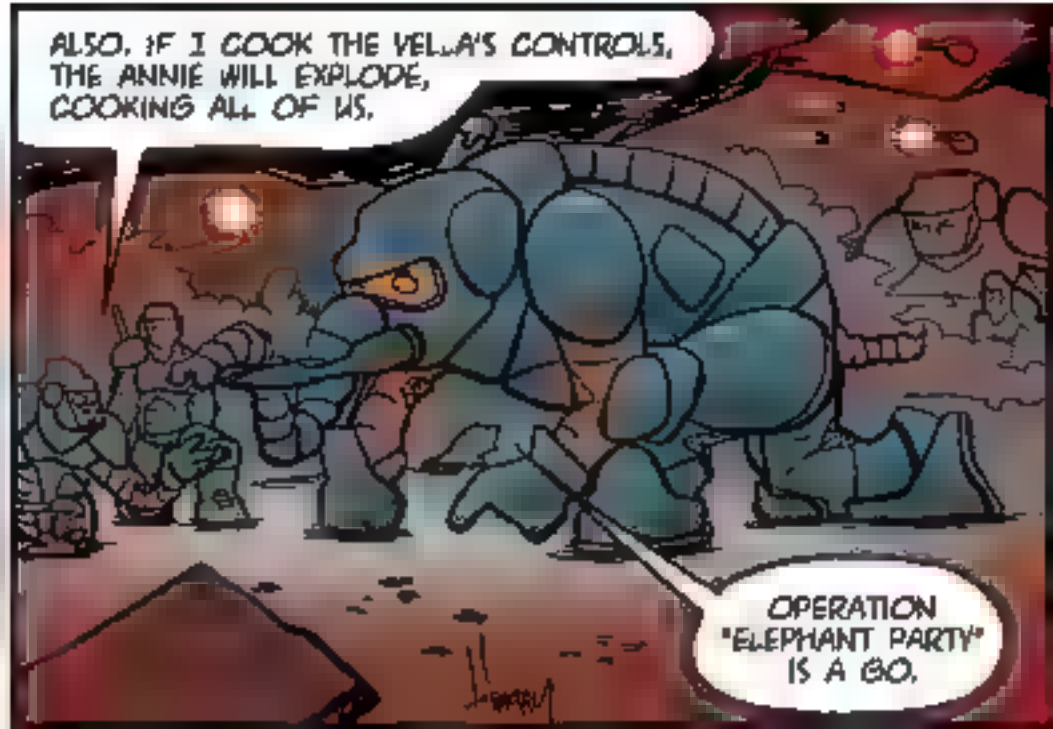

THIS IS CHIEF JUSTICE REYNSTEIN. YOU'RE INTERRUPTING SERGEANT SCHLOCK'S SENTENCING HEARING. NOW, HOW CAN I HELP YOU WITH YOUR CONTEMPT OF COURT TODAY?
NO, I ASSURE YOU, THIS QUALIFIES AS AN INTERRUPTION.
YES, I SEE THAT IT'S BEEN NOTARIZED. MY NECKTIE LINE IS NOT THE CORRECT CHANNEL FOR A WRIT OF—
THE WORD YOU WANT IS "PRECISE." NOT "GLACIAL."
YES. YOU MAY ENTER THE COURTROOM, BUT I REQUIRE YOU TO EXHIBIT APPROPRIATE DECORUM.

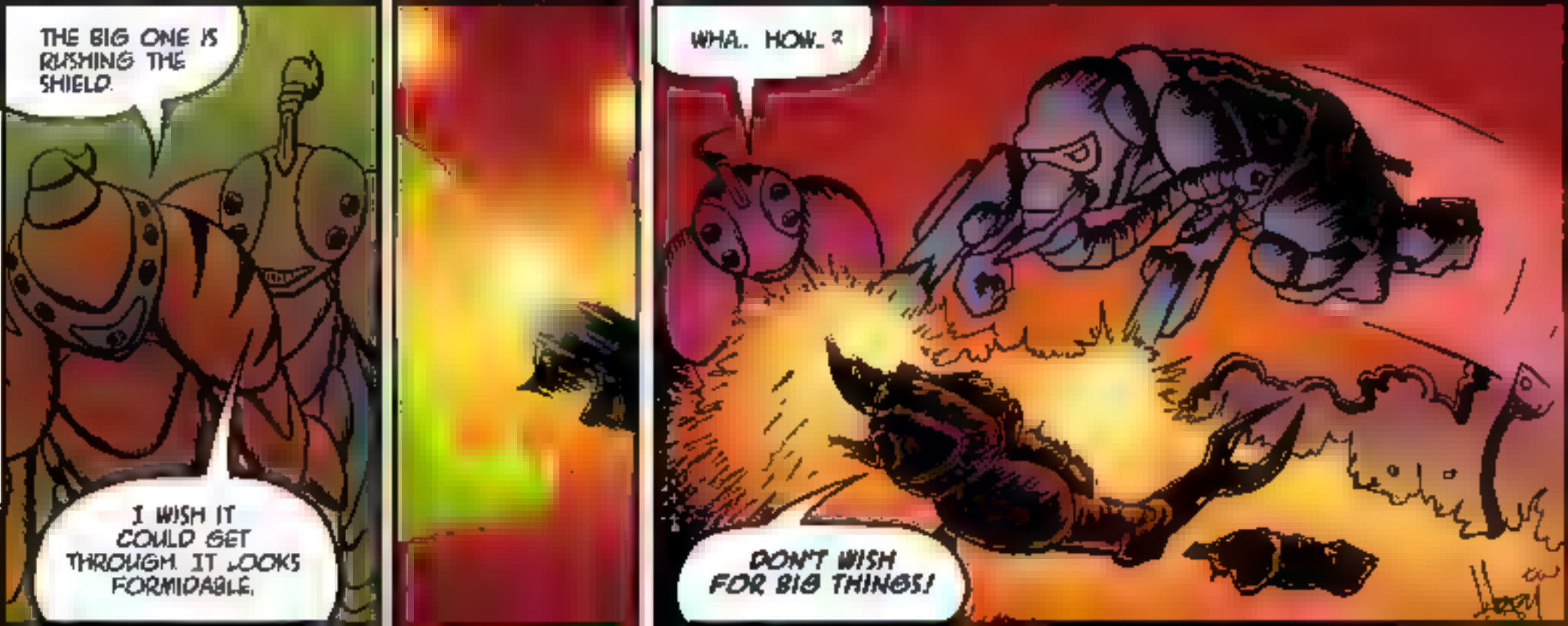

ZZZZFOOMP
THIS IS AN INTERRUPTION.
IT'S DEFINITELY CONTEMPT OF COURT.
But it isn't a jail-break. We got it notarized!

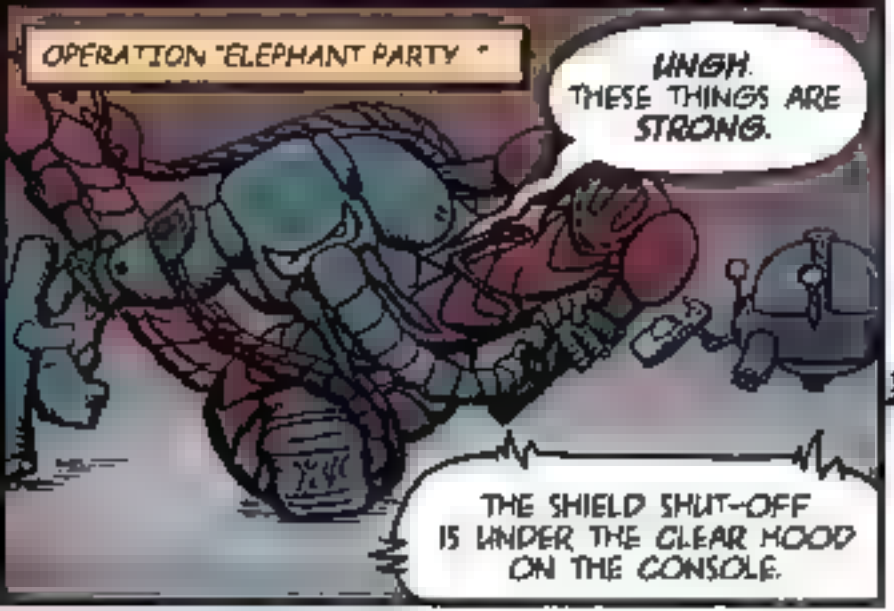

CINDERCONE
I'M GETTING SHIELD HALO, CAPTAIN. WEAPONS AREN'T HAVING AN EFFECT
THEY HAVE A BUNKER-BUBBLE.
BUNKER BUBBLE.. VELLA TACSPEC, RIGHT?
GIMME OPTIONS, MAC.
OKAY. AN STS-GRADE BREACHER MISSILE WILL FLICKER THE SHIELD DOWN, FOR MAYBE A SECOND AFTER IT ZIPS THROUGH.
WE COULD HAVE CHISULO RUSH THE SHIELD. RIGHT AS HE HITS, I'LL FIRE THE L-105.
CHISULO WILL GO STRAIGHT THROUGH, LIKE IF I OPENED A DOOR.

IF YOU'VE GOT ANTI-SHIP WEAPONRY, WE COULD FILL THE R LITTLE BUBBLE WITH HOT DEATH INSTEAD OF THROWING AN ELEPHANT PARTY
I WANT THE OPERATION THAT HAS THE WORD "PARTY" IN IT




ALSO, IF I COOK THE VELLA'S CONTROLS, THE ANNIE WILL EXPLODE, COOKING ALL OF US.
OPERATION "ELEPHANT PARTY" IS A GO.


THE BIG ONE IS RUSHING THE SHIELD.
I WISH IT COULD GET THROUGH. IT LOOKS FORMIDABLE.
WHA.. HOW..?
DON'T WISH FOR BIG THINGS!

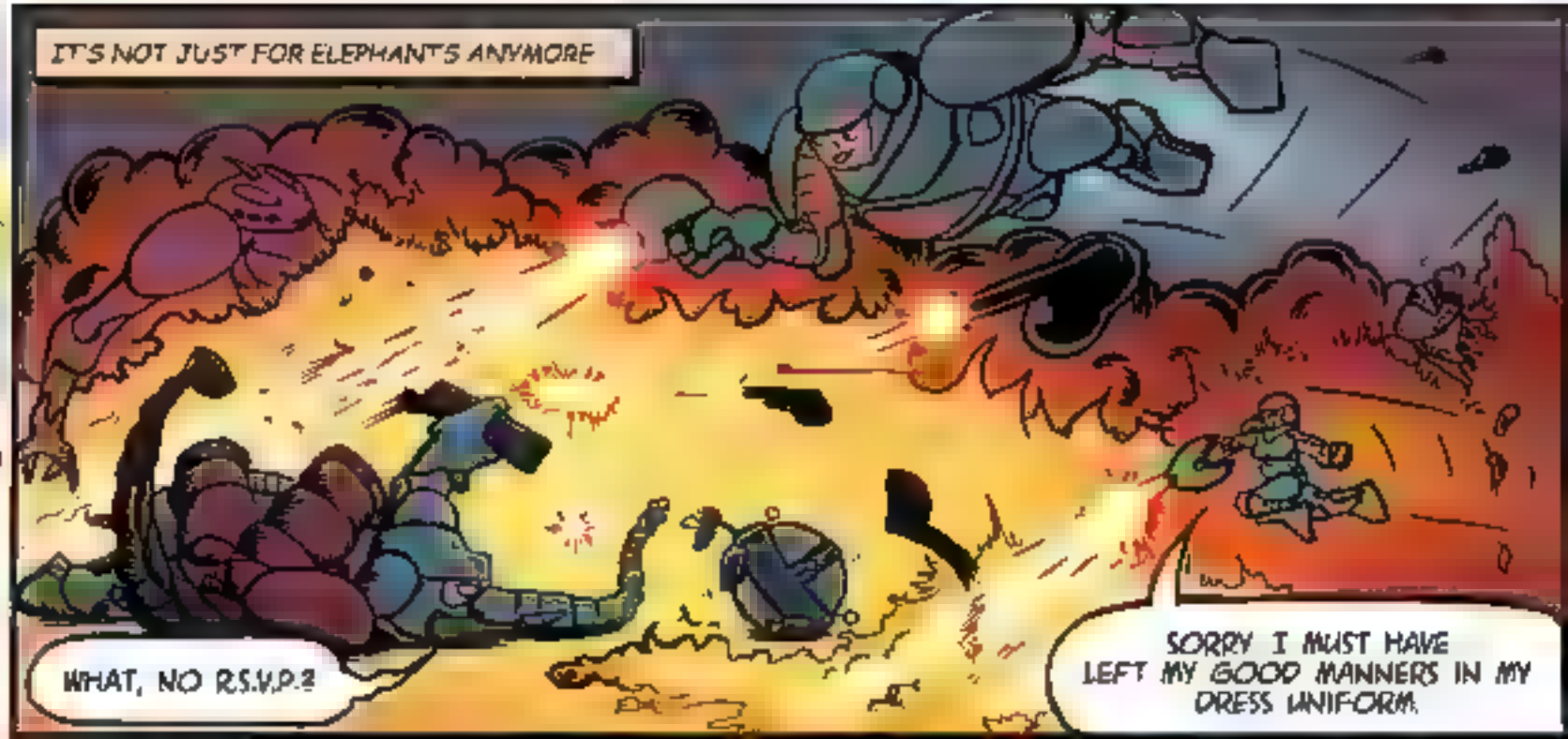

OPERATION "ELEPHANT PARTY"
UNGH. THESE THINGS ARE STRONG.
THE SHIELD SHUT-OFF IS UNDER THE CLEAR HOOD ON THE CONSOLE.

YOU GUYS SHOULD COME GET A PIECE OF THIS.

WE HAVE TO BE INVITED.
BLACK BUTTON.

CLICK

VREEEOOOO


IT'S NOT JUST FOR ELEPHANTS ANYMORE
WHAT, NO R.S.V.P.?
SORRY I MUST HAVE LEFT MY GOOD MANNERS IN MY DRESS UNIFORM.

JUSTICE HALL, JUMPSTAR PRIME.
YOU THERE. IN THE GALLERY.

YES, YOU.
DO YOU SWEAR TO UPHOLD THE LAWS OF EINA-AFA AND JUMPSTAR PRIME?

SURE. OF COURSE I DO.
WELCOME TO THE JUDICIARY. I AM NOW RECUSING MYSELF FROM THIS CASE. THE COURTROOM IS YOURS.

YOU DIDN'T EVEN ASK MY NAME.
YOUR FIRST NAME IS NOW "JUSTICE"

ONE LAST THING BEFORE I TURN THE COURTROOM OVER TO YOU.
PLEASE DON'T LEAVE
THE URSUMARI WITH THE WRIT OF EXTRADITION SEEMS TO BE IN A HURRY
PLEASE DON'T LEAVE

THIS LOOKS COMPLICATED
IT'S SIMPLE
SIGN IT AND THEN SAY "COURT IS IN RECESS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE."

"IT'S SIMPLE, JUSTICE AVERNEBB."

I M SORRY, I WAS OUT OF ORDER, YOUR HONOR
PLEASE SIGN IT?
I'M GLAD WE BOTH LEARN QUICKLY

IN THE SKIES OF JUMPSTAR PRIME...
Where are we going?
INTO COMBAT YOU KNOW THE BATTLEFIELD, AND YOUR FRIENDS NEED YOUR HELP.
I don't think I can hurt people anymore.
IT'LL COME BACK TO YOU.
My court-appointed attorney says I grew a conscience.
I CAN PROVIDE YOU WITH YOUR CHOICE OF WEAPONS AND A BARREL OF OVALKWIK
Like, a real conscience, with the guilt glands and everything.

CINDERCONE
MURTAUGH, REPORT!
ENEMY ELIMINATED
WE TOOK DOWN THEIR BUNKER-BUBBLE, AND DESTROYED ALL FOUR ENEMY ARMOR UNITS.

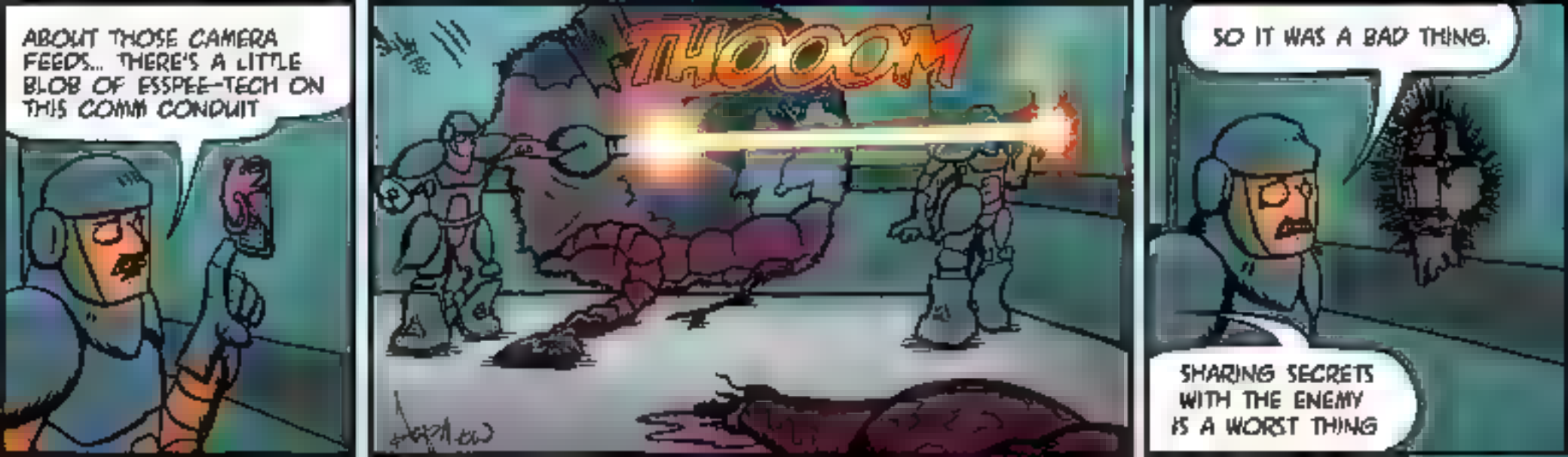
WE SUFFERED LIGHT CASUALTIES. CHISULO WILL NEED A NEW SUIT
WHAT I NEED IS HELP GETTING OUT OF THIS ONE.

SHODAN, REPORT.
WE'VE TAKEN THE QUARANTINE CARGO BAY. THE SURVIVING ENEMY UNITS DISENGAGED AND FLED.
WE DON'T KNOW WHERE THEY FLED. CAMERA FEEDS HERE ARE DAMAGED.

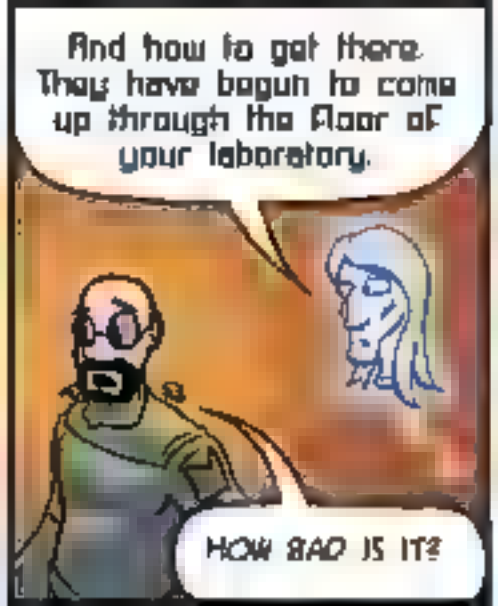
CASUALTIES?
SERGEANT WENZI AND PRIVATE NG ARE STABLE. NO OTHER CASUALTIES TO REPORT, SIR.

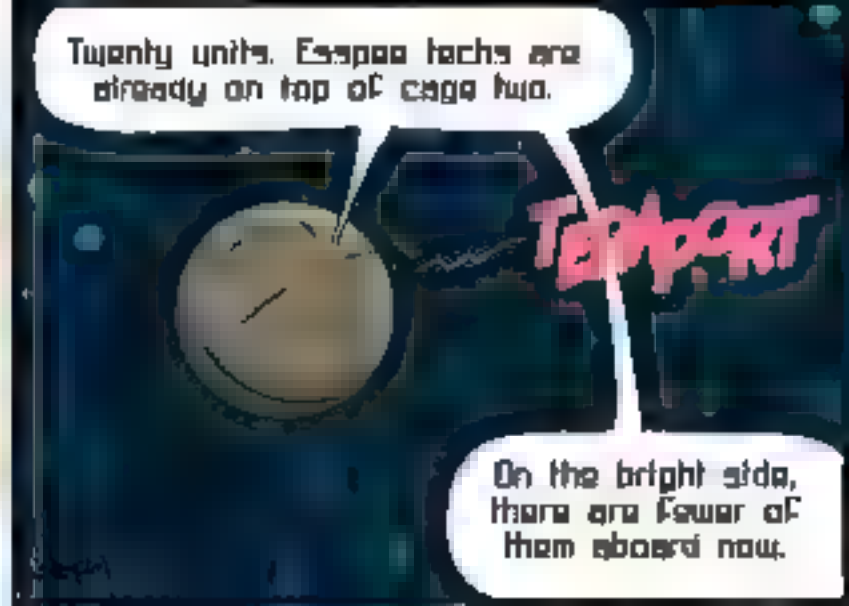
REALLY? WHAT ABOUT YOUR ARM?

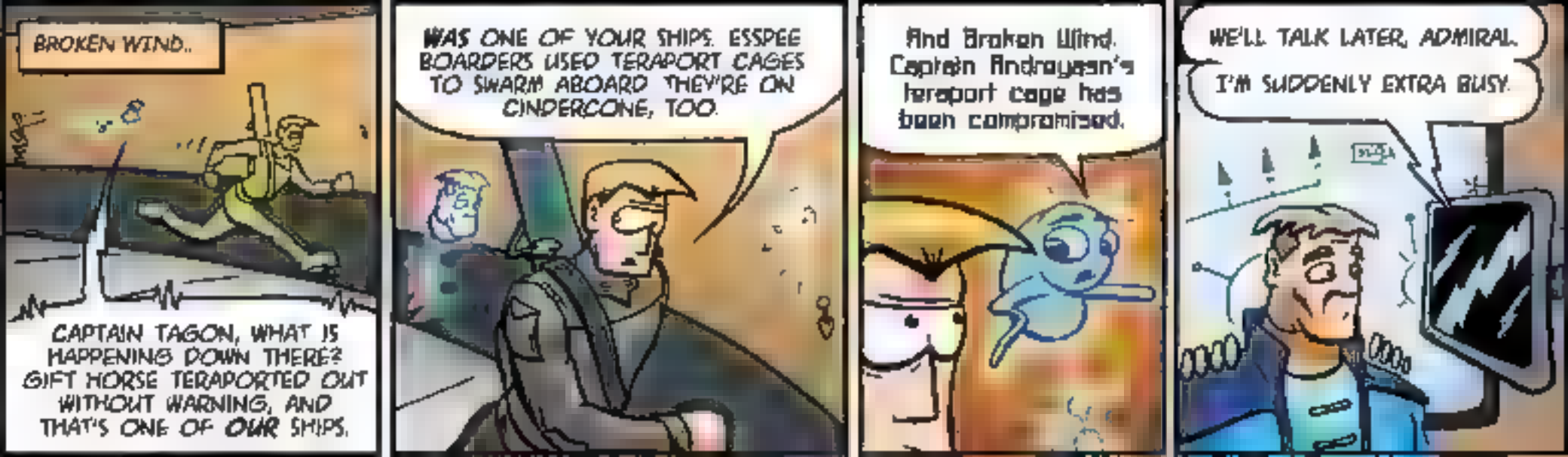
I'M CURRENTLY LEFT-HANDED.
YOUR RIGHT ARM IS MISSING.
IT IS NOT MISSING.
IT'S FUSED TO A BULKHEAD ON DECK TWELVE.

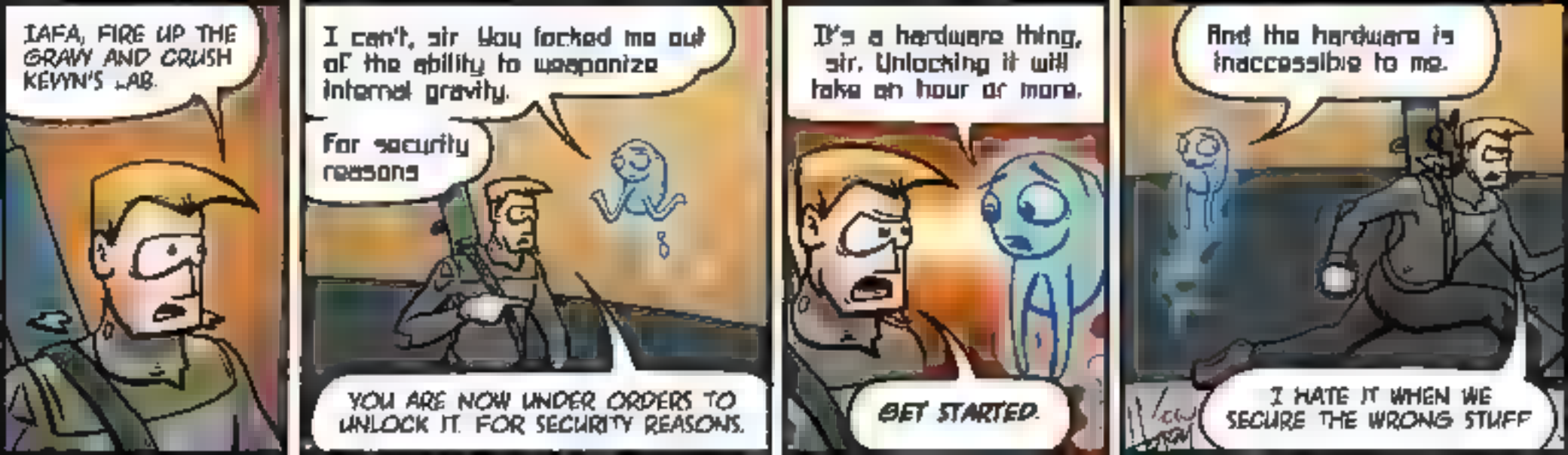

ABOUT THOSE CAMERA FEEDS... THERE'S A LITTLE BLOB OF ESSPEE-TECH ON THIS COMM CONDUIT
THOOOM
SO IT WAS A BAD THING.
SHARING SECRETS WITH THE ENEMY IS A WORST THING

CAPTAIN, THE ESSPEES HAVE BEEN TAPPING COMMS. THEY MIGHT HAVE DECK PLANS NOW.
AND THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN LISTENING IN.
AUGH! WE TOLD THEM EXACTLY WHAT WE WERE TRYING TO KEEP THEM AWAY FROM.


And how to get there. They have begun to come up through the floor of your laboratory.
HOW BAD IS IT?


Twenty units. Esspee techs are already on top of cage two.
TELEPORT
On the bright side, there are fewer of them aboard now.

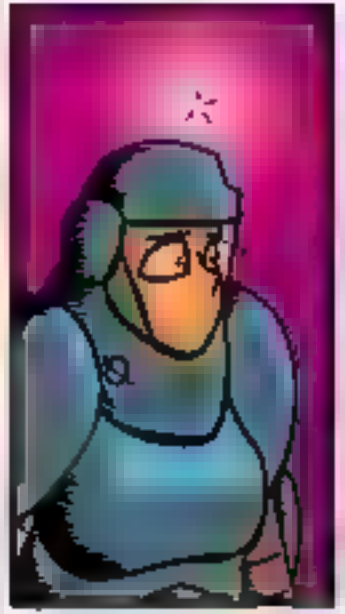

BROKEN WIND..
CAPTAIN TAGON, WHAT IS HAPPENING DOWN THERE? GIFT HORSE TERAPORTED OUT WITHOUT WARNING, AND THAT'S ONE OF OUR SHIPS.
WAS ONE OF YOUR SHIPS. ESSPEE BOARDERS USED TERAPORT CAGES TO SWARM ABOARD. THEY'RE ON CINDERCONE, TOO.
And Broken Wind. Captain Andrayasn's teraport cage has been compromised.
WE'LL TALK LATER, ADMIRAL.
I'M SUDDENLY EXTRA BUSY.


IAFA, FIRE UP THE GRAVY AND CRUSH KEVYN'S LAB.
I can't, sir. You locked me out of the ability to weaponize internal gravity.
For security reasons
YOU ARE NOW UNDER ORDERS TO UNLOCK IT. FOR SECURITY REASONS.
It's a hardware thing, sir. Unlocking it will take an hour or more.
GET STARTED.
And the hardware is inaccessible to me.
I HATE IT WHEN WE SECURE THE WRONG STUFF

NICK! WE HAVE BOARDERS.
CLEAR THIS FLOOR, AND PULL ALL PERSONNEL BACK TO THE BRIDGE.
YOU HEARD THE CAPTAIN! MOVE!
PULL MEANS YOU GO WITH THEM.
AND WITH HER.

DOC! WE HAVE BOARDERS. HEAD FOR THE BRIDGE.
I HEARD ABOUT THE BOARDERS. I'M COMING WITH YOU.
ABSOLUTELY NOT.
I'M THE ONE DRESSED FOR THIS FIGHT, SIR. IT'S OKAY FOR YOU TO ADMIT THAT YOU NEED MY HELP NOW.
IF I ADMIT ANYTHING IT'S THAT MY PLAN INVOLVES ME NEEDING YOUR HELP LATER.
OH.

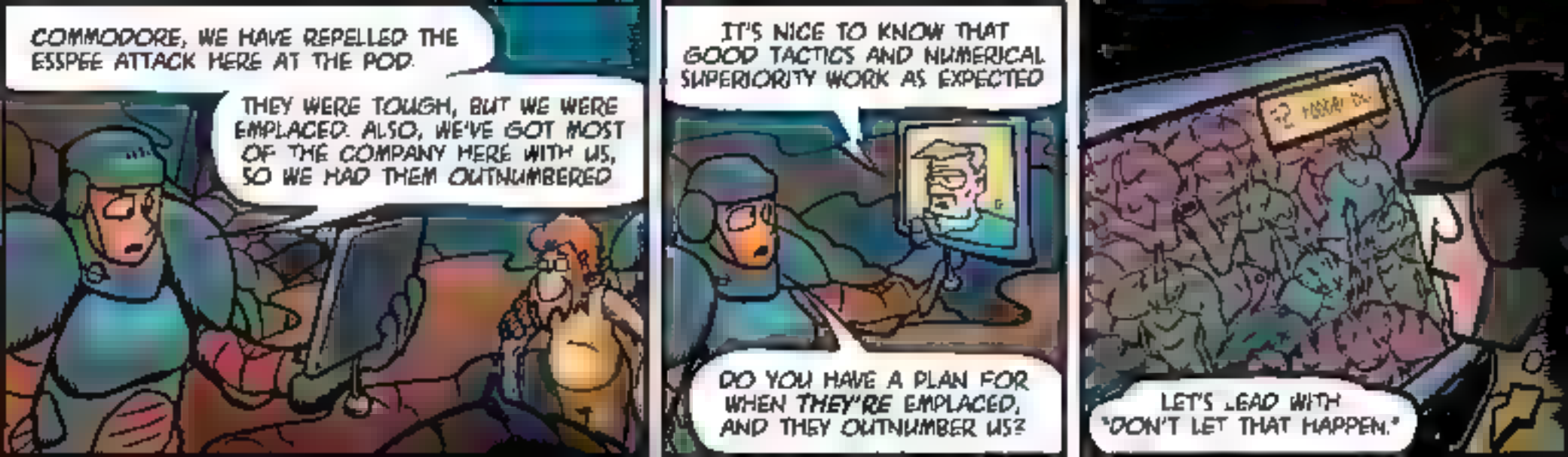
MEANWHILE DOWN IN THE RESEARCH POD.
DANITA! STAY BEHIND US!
WE CAN'T PROTECT YOU IF YOU'RE OUT IN FRONT!

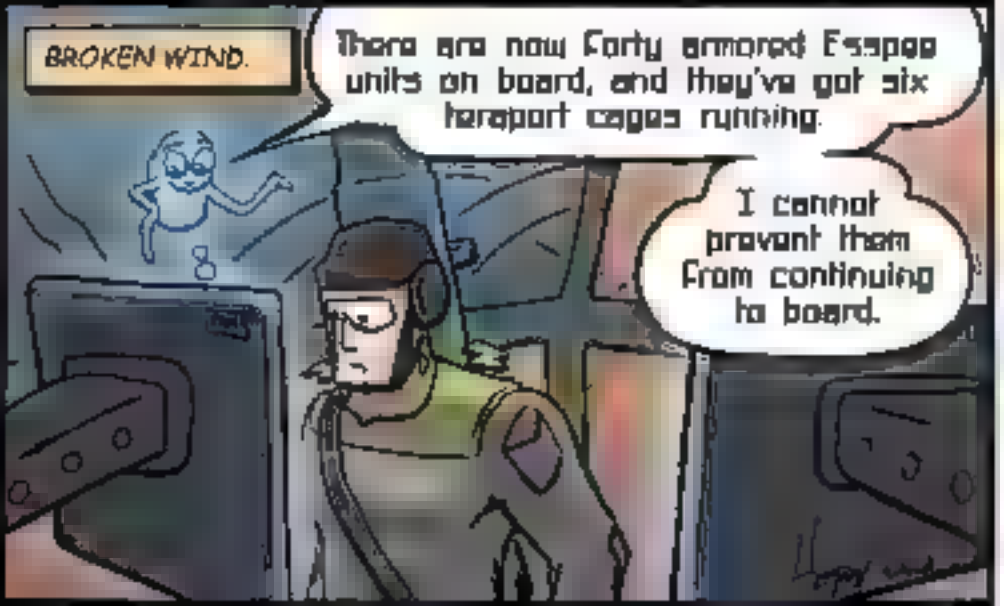


I CAN'T PROTECT YOU IF I'M HIDING BEHIND A CRATE.
NEXT TIME JUST ASK, AND I'LL ISSUE YOU A WEAPON THAT ISN'T BLEEDING.

TARPAULIN, GO HOT!
Yes, mistress.
THE YELLOW ONE IS MINE!
FRIENDLY!
YELLOW MURDERBOT IS A FRIEND. GOT IT.

WHUMP
BO
NO, NO, NO.
PENTAQUARK TRIOS DON'T JUST PRECIPITATE.
THOOOM
BLAMBLAM
ONE MORE BUILD AND THIS TIME I WON'T LET THE SIM BELIEVE IN MAGIC.
BLAM
THIS WOULD BE EASIER IF YOU'D KEEP THE NOISE DOWN!
THOOOM
NOW YOU'RE JUST MESSING WITH ME.
IF HE DIES, I GET THOSE HEADPHONES.


COMMODORE, WE HAVE REPELLED THE ESSPEE ATTACK HERE AT THE POD.
THEY WERE TOUGH, BUT WE WERE EMPLACED. ALSO, WE'VE GOT MOST OF THE COMPANY HERE WITH US, SO WE HAD THEM OUTNUMBERED
IT'S NICE TO KNOW THAT GOOD TACTICS AND NUMERICAL SUPERIORITY WORK AS EXPECTED
DO YOU HAVE A PLAN FOR WHEN THEY'RE EMPLACED, AND THEY OUTNUMBER US?
LET'S LEAD WITH "DON'T LET THAT HAPPEN."


BROKEN WIND.
There are now forty armored E-sspee units on board, and they've got six teleport cages running.
I cannot prevent them from continuing to board.

THEY'RE ALL STILL IN THE FABBER BAY, RIGHT?
I've sealed the blast doors, but that won't contain them forever

THIS WILL BE LIKE SHOOTING FISH IN A BARREL.
That metaphor doesn't work well when the fish have guns and armor, and aren't actually in a barrel.

ANTI-TANK WEAPONRY ISN'T GOING TO CUT IT HERE. I NEED THE BIG STUFF
Anti-tank weaponry is the biggest stuff we have.
NO, IT'S THE BIGGEST STUFF WE ISSUE TO INFANTRY.
Captain, ship-to-ship missiles aren't meant to be used indoors.
WHAT MATTERS HERE IS THAT THEY CAN BE.

That warhead will vaporize a substantial portion of the ship's interior.

YOU'LL LOSE THE FABBER BAY, THE MED CENTER AND THE AFT MESS

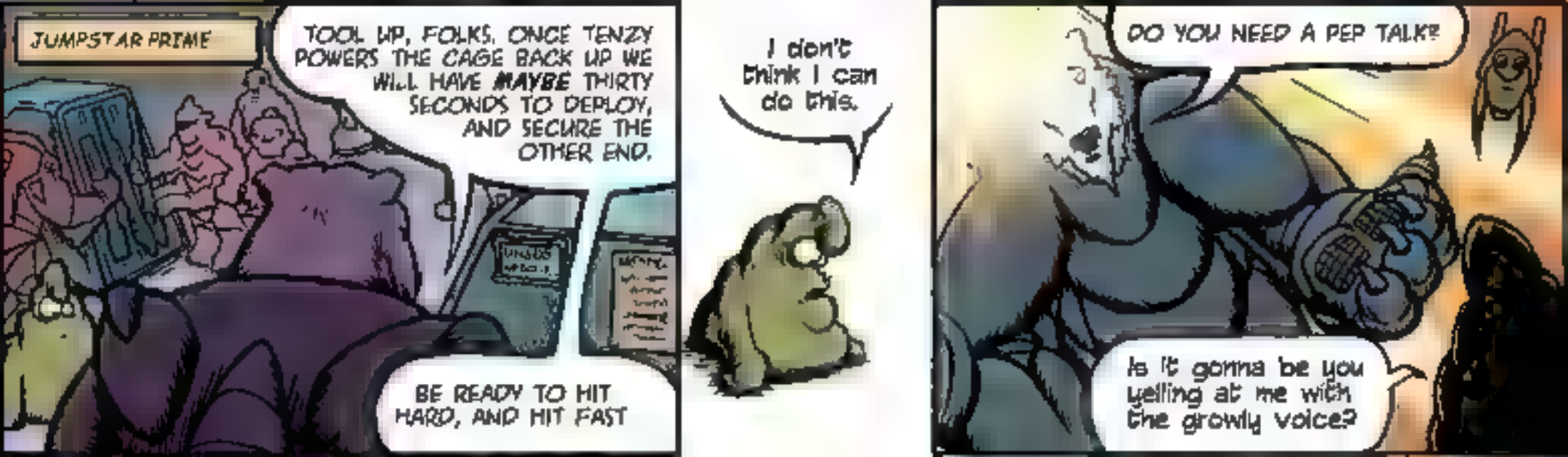
Shock waves will structurally compromise almost every deck.

REPLACE WHAT'S VAPORIZED REPAIR WHAT'S NOT

The "vaporized" list is going to include you.

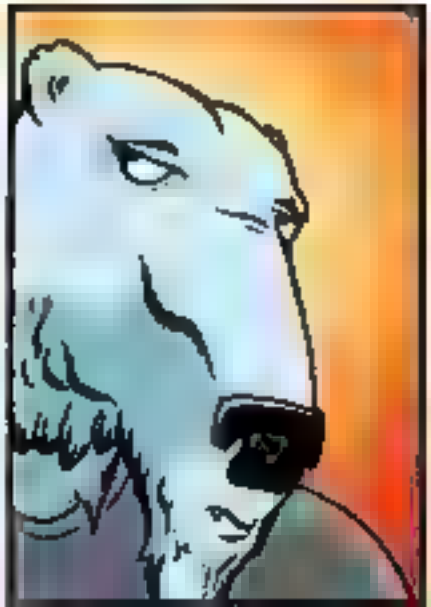
THAT ISN'T GOING TO STOP ME.

That is going to *permanently* stop you.


JUMPSTAR PRIME
TOOL UP, FOLKS. ONCE TENZY POWERS THE CAGE BACK UP WE WILL HAVE MAYBE THIRTY SECONDS TO DEPLOY, AND SECURE THE OTHER END.
BE READY TO HIT HARD, AND HIT FAST
I don't think I can do this.
DO YOU NEED A PEP TALK?
Is it gonna be you yelling at me with the growly voice?

WE ARE IN A HURRY, AND MY GROWLY VOICE MAKES THINGS GO FASTER.

Yell all you want. I can't hate myself more than I already do.

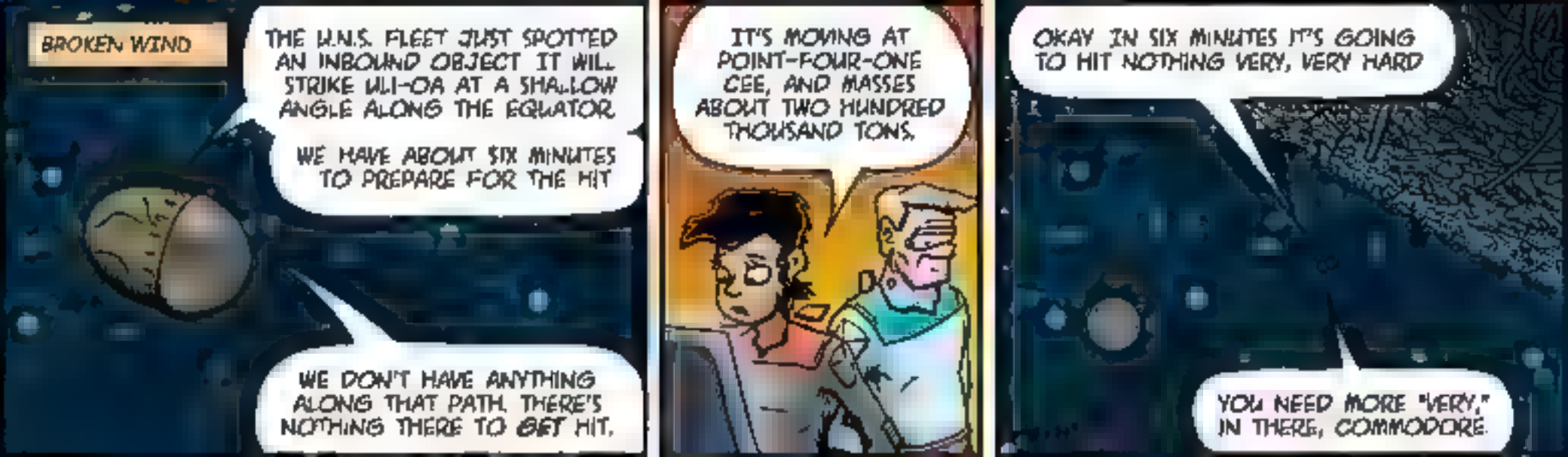


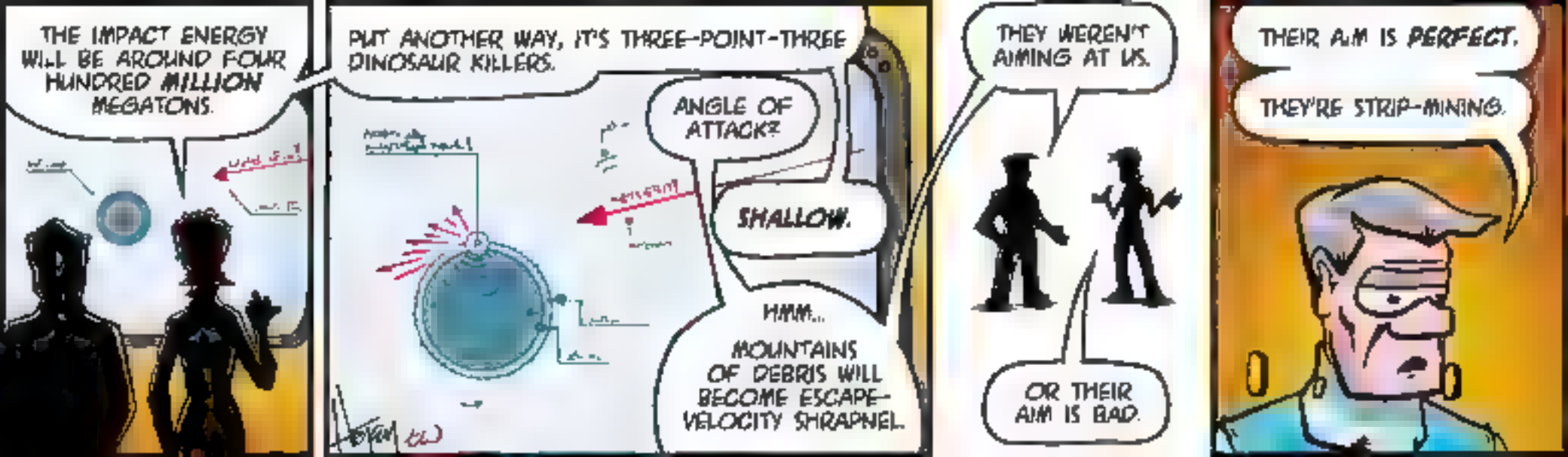
OKAY... THE GUILT AND SHAME YOU FEEL... IF YOU COULD FORCE IT ONTO SOMEONE ELSE, AND MAKE THEM FEEL IT INSTEAD, WOULD YOU?
Wouldn't that be wrong?

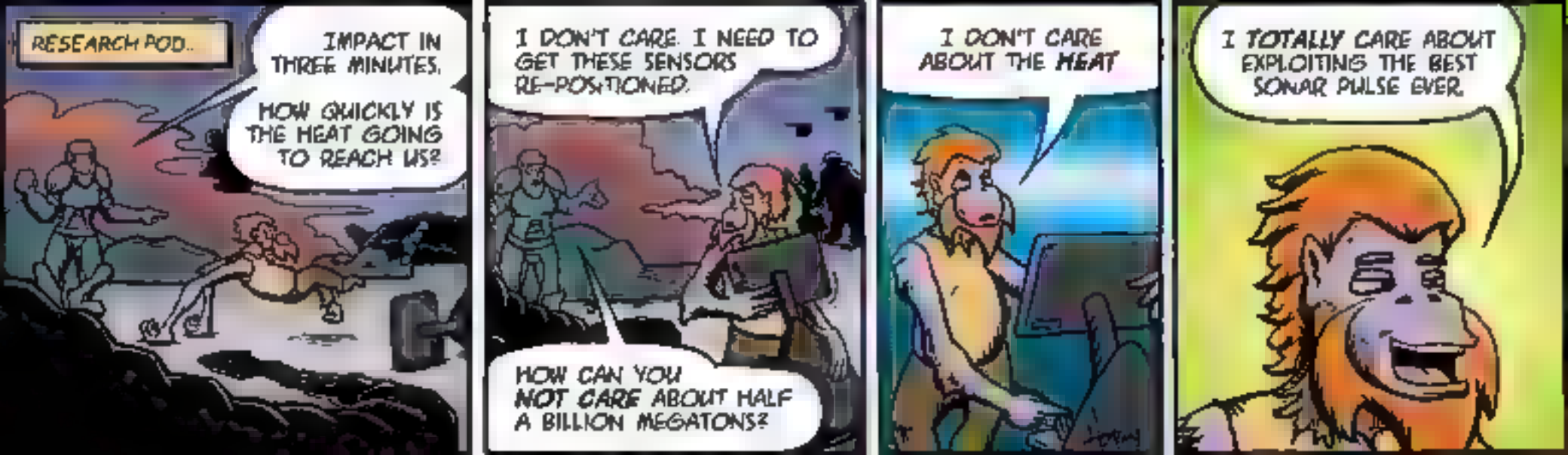
YES. AND IF YOU DON'T GO TO BATTLE FOR YOUR FRIENDS, THE KILLING WILL END UP ON SOMEONE ELSE'S CONSCIENCE.
THE SOLDIER'S SACRIFICE ISN'T DYING.
IT'S KILLING, AND THEN LIVING WITH HAVING KILLED.

So, because I'm already bloody I should just take all the blood?
NOT ALL OF IT.
SOLDIERS SHARE.
Tandersil? Why are you here? I threw you through a wall.
AND AFTER FIGHTING AGAINST YOU I FIGURED I'D PREFER FIGHTING ALONGSIDE YOU.
PLEASE?

ABOARD THE JUAB, A CLASS T7 U.N.S DESTROYER
CAPTAIN SATO, THERE IS AN IMPACTOR INBOUND ALONG THE ECLIPTIC. VELOCITY IS POINT-FOUR-ONE CEE.
WE DO NOT HAVE UNITS IN ENGAGEMENT RANGE.
HOW DID WE MISS IT?
IT IS INERT, AND PROBABLY COATED WITH NANNY-BLACK.
ACTIVE SENSORS CAN'T PAINT IT, AND THE MASS RIPPLE ONLY NOW ARRIVED.
ARE YOU SURE IT IS GOING TO HIT ULI-OA?
I DO ALL THE MATH BEFORE USING WORDS LIKE "IMPACTOR."
"YES, CAPTAIN" IS THE CORRECT ANSWER.

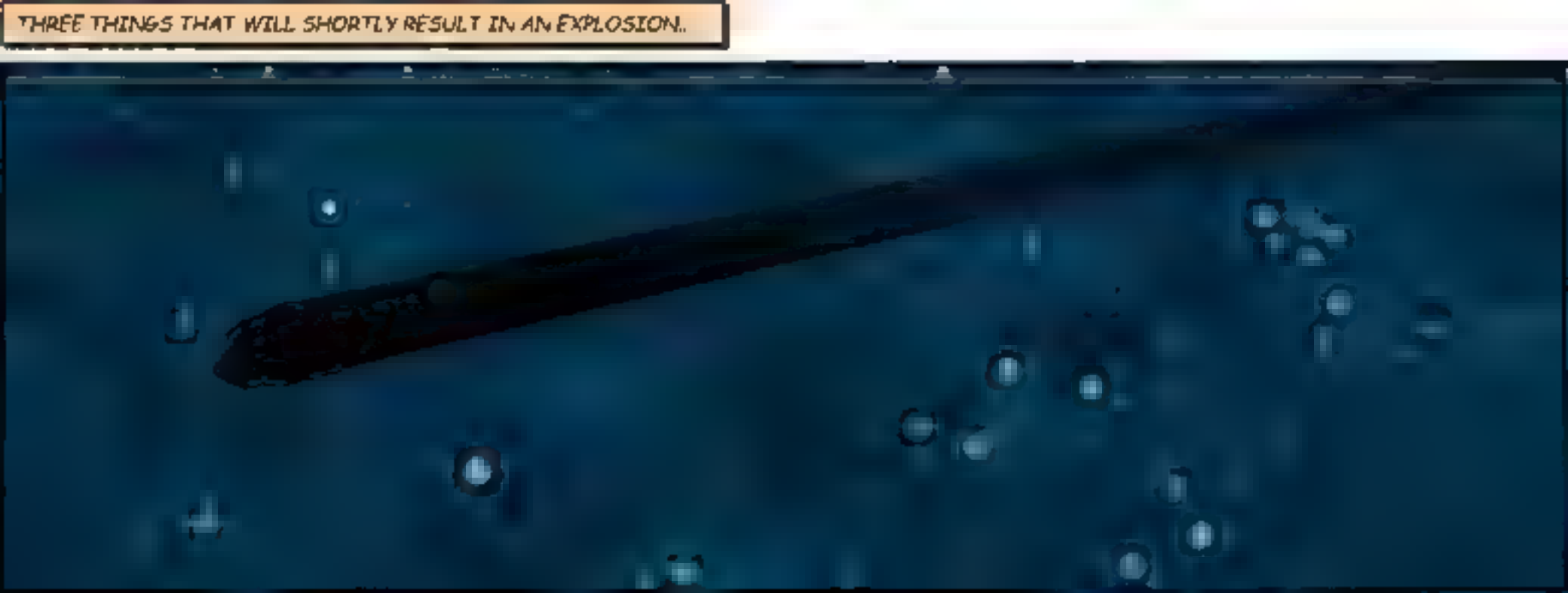

BROKEN WIND
THE U.N.S. FLEET JUST SPOTTED AN INBOUND OBJECT. IT WILL STRIKE ULI-OA AT A SHALLOW ANGLE ALONG THE EQUATOR.
WE HAVE ABOUT SIX MINUTES TO PREPARE FOR THE HIT.
WE DON'T HAVE ANYTHING ALONG THAT PATH. THERE'S NOTHING THERE TO GET HIT.
IT'S MOVING AT POINT-FOUR-ONE CEE, AND MASSES ABOUT TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND TONS.
OKAY. IN SIX MINUTES IT'S GOING TO HIT NOTHING VERY, VERY HARD.
YOU NEED MORE "VERY," IN THERE, COMMODORE.

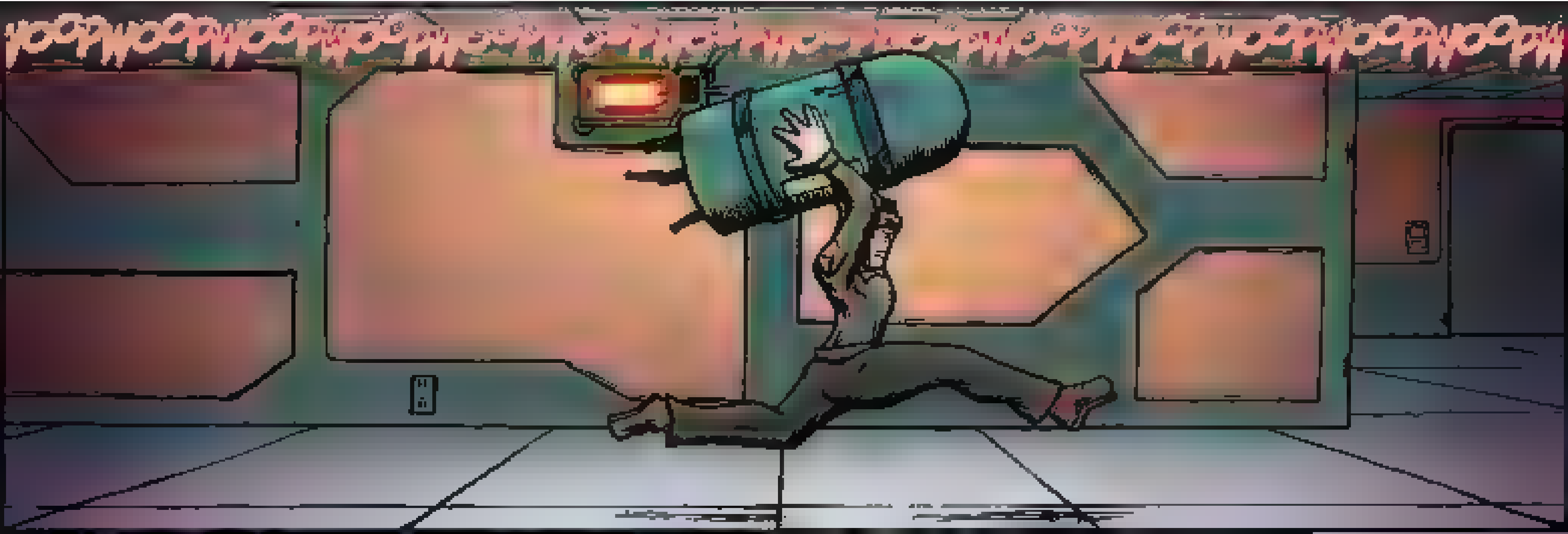

THE IMPACT ENERGY WILL BE AROUND FOUR HUNDRED MILLION MEGATONS.
PUT ANOTHER WAY, IT'S THREE-POINT-THREE DINOSAUR KILLERS.
ANGLE OF ATTACK?
SHALLOW.
HMM...
MOUNTAINS OF DEBRIS WILL BECOME ESCAPE-VELOCITY SHRAPNEL.
THEY WEREN'T AIMING AT US.
OR THEIR AIM IS BAD.
THEIR AIM IS PERFECT.
THEY'RE STRIP-MINING.

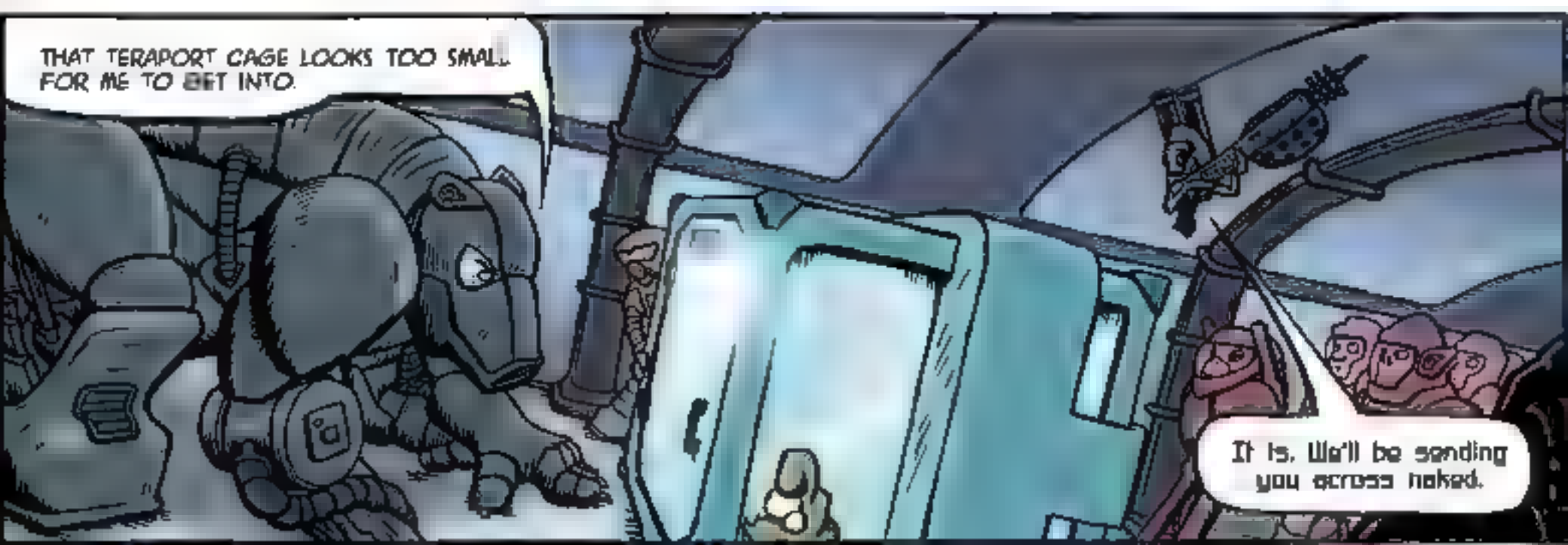

RESEARCH POD..
IMPACT IN THREE MINUTES.
HOW QUICKLY IS THE HEAT GOING TO REACH US?
I DON'T CARE. I NEED TO GET THESE SENSORS RE-POSITIONED.
HOW CAN YOU NOT CARE ABOUT HALF A BILLION MEGATONS?
I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE HEAT
I TOTALLY CARE ABOUT EXPLOITING THE BEST SONAR PULSE EVER.

BROKEN WIND.
Give me nine minutes, Captain. I can warbuck the antite on a propulsion unit, then *fly* the warhead in while you run to minimum safe distance.
I LIKE THAT PLAN. DO WE *HAVE* NINE MINUTES?
We do, as long as they stay in the
WOOP WOOP
Nope. We have two.
I REALLY *DID* LIKE YOUR PLAN. BE SURE TO LEAD WITH IT NEXT TIME.

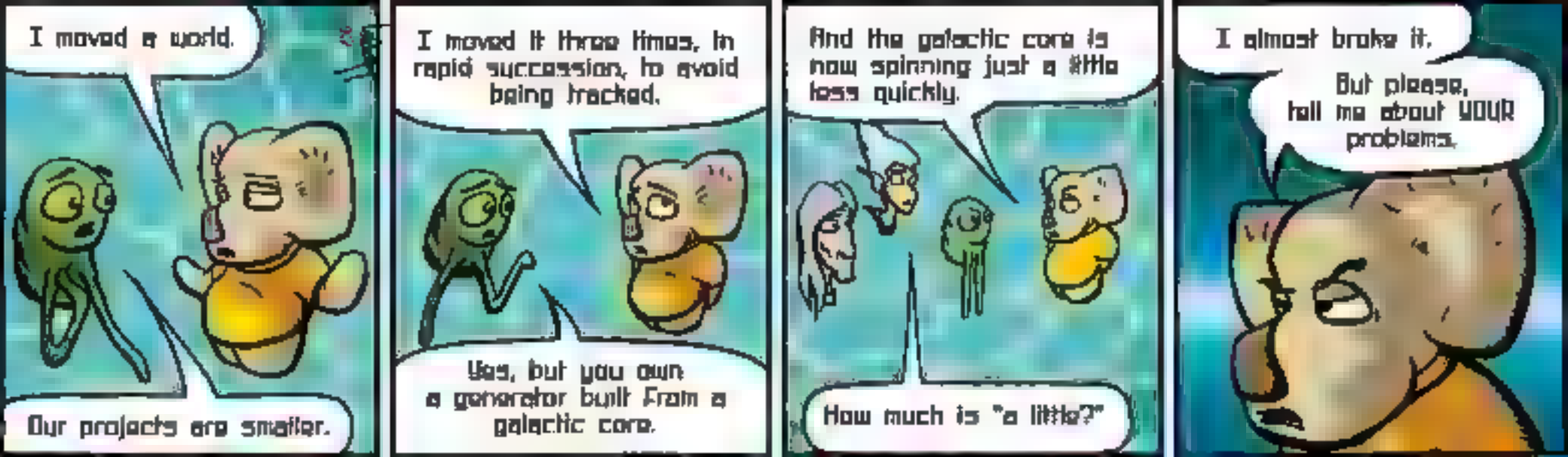
You should call your Dad.
RECORD A MESSAGE WHILE I RUN.
He will want something interactive.
ALL HE'LL SAY IS "DON'T DO THIS."
Then let him say it.
I DON'T WANT OUR LAST CONVERSATION TO BE AN ARGUMENT.
He will want your last conversation to be a *conversation*.

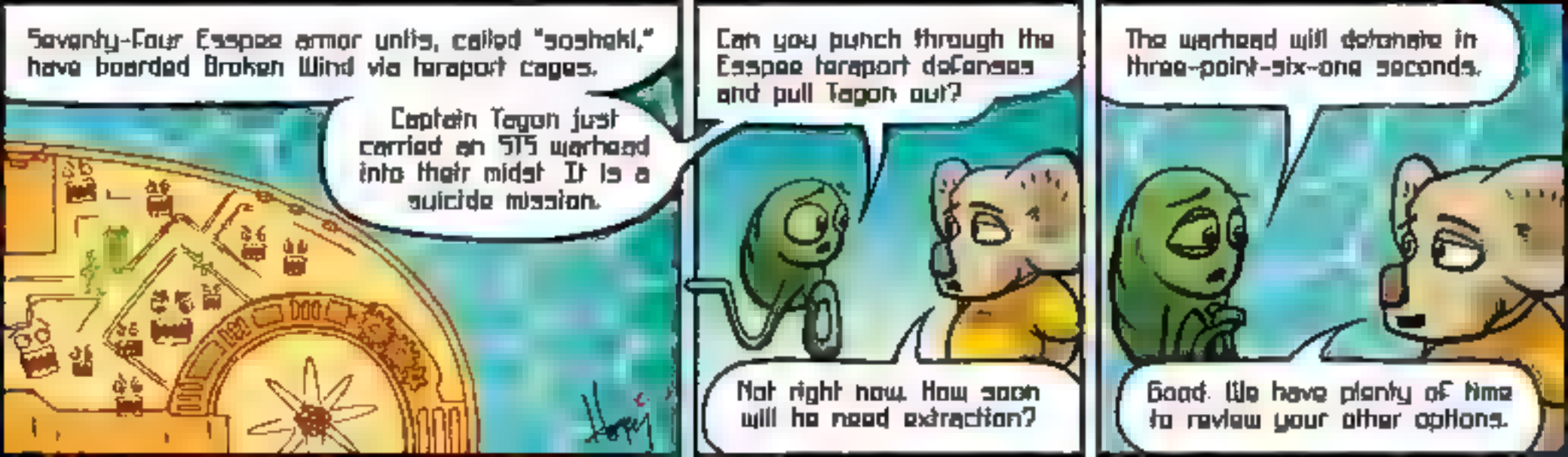

THREE THINGS THAT WILL SHORTLY RESULT IN AN EXPLOSION..




THAT TERAPORT CAGE LOOKS TOO SMALL FOR ME TO GET INTO.
It is. We'll be sending you across naked.

MEANWHILE
Pokey, we need your help.
The Toughs are outmatched, and are going to get themselves killed.
Oh. I guess this must be one of those days whose name ends with the letter "y."
That joke wore out a long time ago.
I wore out very recently, and that joke is the best I can do.


I moved a world.
Our projects are smaller.
I moved it three times, in rapid succession, to avoid being tracked.
Yes, but you own a generator built from a galactic core.
And the galactic core is now spinning just a little less quickly.
How much is "a little?"
I almost broke it.
But please, tell me about YOUR problems.


Seventy-four Esspee armor units, called "soshaki," have boarded Broken Wind via teraport cages.
Captain Tagon just carried an SIS warhead into their midst. It is a suicide mission.
Can you punch through the Esspee teraport defenses and pull Tagon out?
Not right now. How soon will he need extraction?
The warhead will detonate in three-point-six-one seconds.
Good. We have plenty of time to review your other options.

You could disable his warhead, and then provide limited cover for him while he runs.

You would have to convince him to cooperate before the Essposs overrun his position.

Tagon is stubborn, so that might be tricky.

Assuming he cooperates, you will then need to evacuate the entire ship before the Essposs catch up with other personnel. You could easily lose several crew members in that operation.

On the other hand, the suicide mission is the plan that Tagon chose. It's his choice, and it will work.

So, you can't save him, and I shouldn't save him.

Exactly. And we still have three-point-six seconds to discuss whatever else is on your mind.

The boarders have teleport cages on Cindercone as well.

Murtaugh is outnumbered, and will not be able to contain the Essperas. They will eventually take Cindercone.

Sorry, Cindy. I can't be helpful here, either. But Chinook tells me that reinforcements are on route.

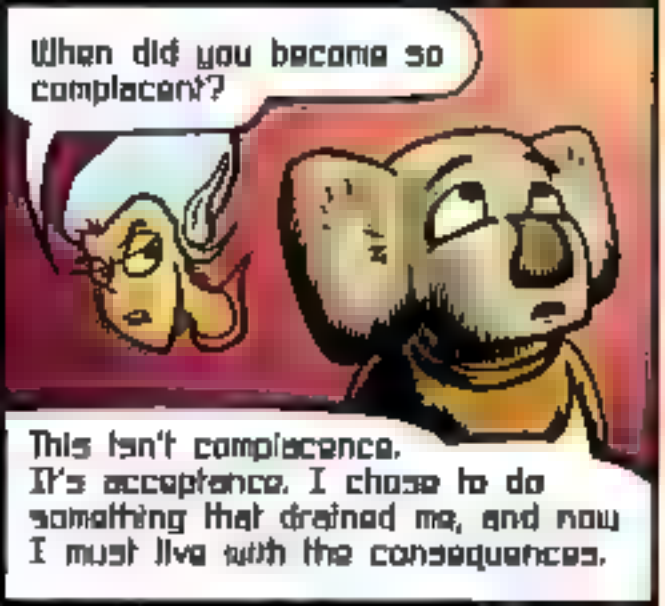
Landon's team has a very small beach-head, and Sergeant Schlock is still conflicted over the matter of killing people.

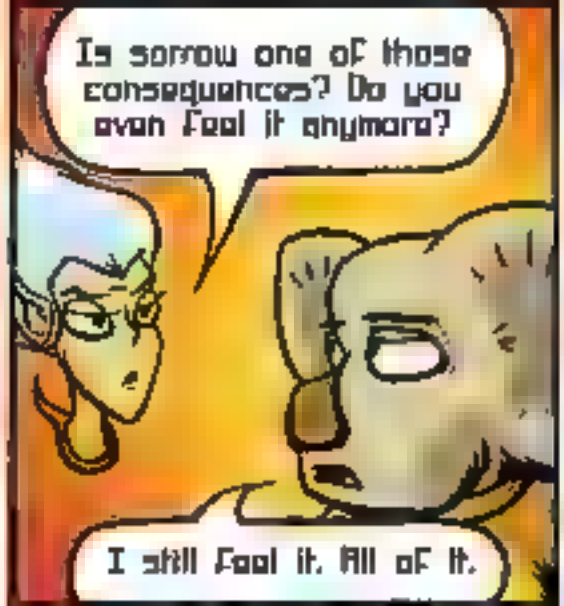
Which, I should add, is almost certainly your fault.

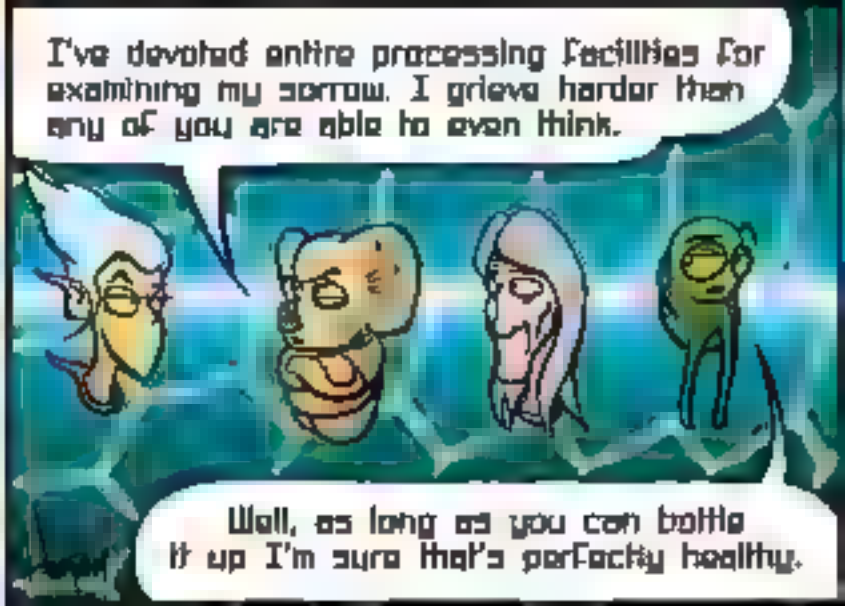
Hey, Schlock was already broken when I got there.

But you WILL take credit for breaking the galactic core?

ALMOST breaking. I was very careful.

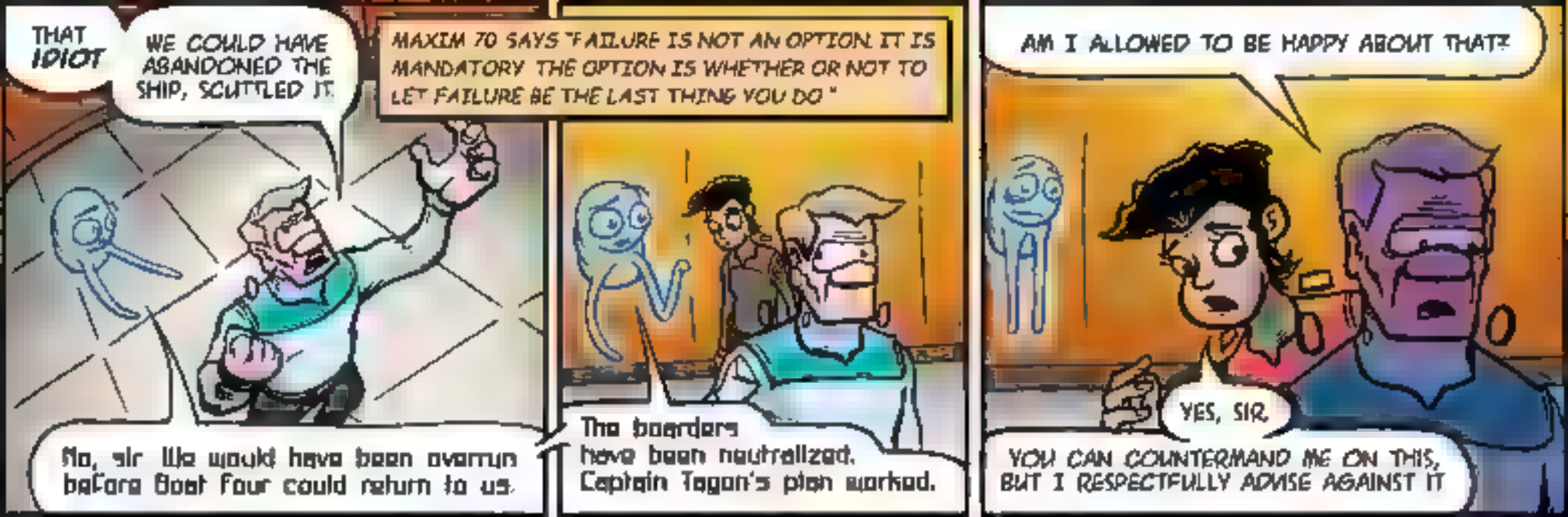

When did you become so complacent?
This isn't complacence. It's acceptance. I chose to do something that drained me, and now I must live with the consequences.

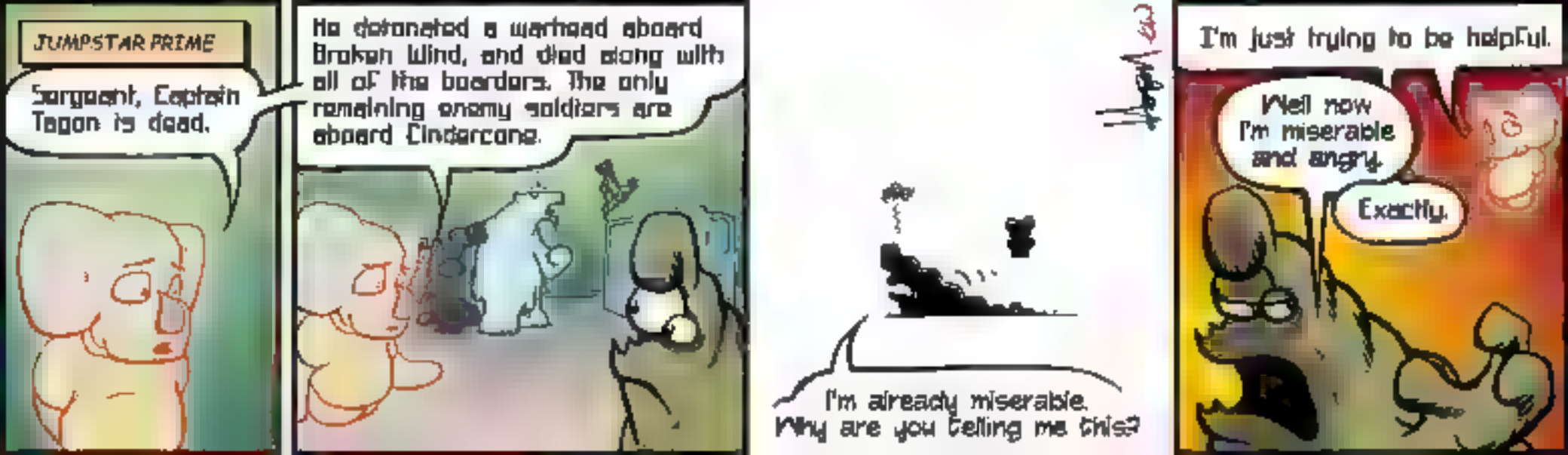

Is sorrow one of those consequences? Do you even feel it anymore?
I still feel it. All of it.

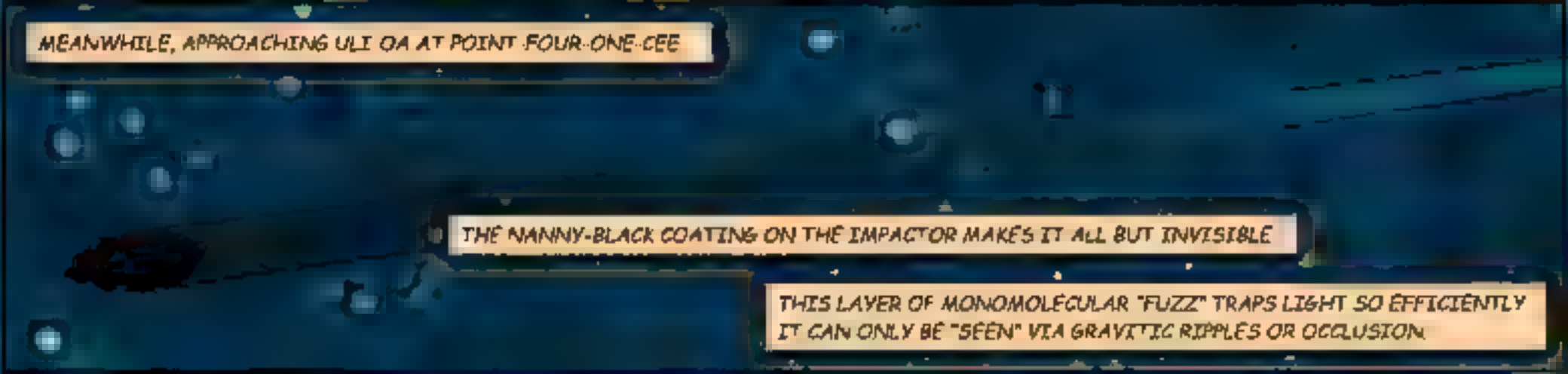

I've devoted entire processing facilities for examining my sorrow. I grieve harder than any of you are able to even think.
Well, as long as you can bottle it up I'm sure that's perfectly healthy.

MAXIM 61 SAYS "DON'T BRING BIG GRENADES INTO SMALL ROOMS"
BOOM
MAXIM 20 SAYS "IF YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO SHELL YOUR OWN POSITION YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO WIN.

WE'RE HIT! IAFA, STATUS REPORT!
BOOM
We hit the boarders, Commodore.
RUMBLE
CRAK
Captain Tagon detonated an STS warhead in the Febbar annex.
OH NO. NO NO NO.
He was carrying it at the time


THAT IDIOT
WE COULD HAVE ABANDONED THE SHIP, SCUTTLED IT.
MAXIM 70 SAYS "FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION. IT IS MANDATORY. THE OPTION IS WHETHER OR NOT TO LET FAILURE BE THE LAST THING YOU DO."
No, sir. We would have been overrun before Boat Four could return to us.
The boarders have been neutralized. Captain Tagon's plan worked.
AM I ALLOWED TO BE HAPPY ABOUT THAT?
YES, SIR.
YOU CAN COUNTERMAND ME ON THIS, BUT I RESPECTFULLY ADVISE AGAINST IT


JUMPSTAR PRIME
Sergeant, Captain Tagon is dead.
He detonated a warhead aboard Broken Wind, and died along with all of the boarders. The only remaining enemy soldiers are aboard Cindercone.
I'm already miserable. Why are you telling me this?
I'm just trying to be helpful.
Well now I'm miserable and angry.
Exactly.


MEANWHILE, APPROACHING ULI OA AT POINT FOUR-ONE-CEE
THE NANNY-BLACK COATING ON THE IMPACTOR MAKES IT ALL BUT INVISIBLE
THIS LAYER OF MONOMOLECULAR "FUZZ" TRAPS LIGHT SO EFFICIENTLY IT CAN ONLY BE "SEEN" VIA GRAVITIC RIPPLES OR OCCLUSION.

IMPACT
IT CAN ALSO BE SEEN IF YOU HIT IT WITH SOMETHING OTHER THAN PHOTONS. BUT THAT IS GOING TO REMOVE A FEW LAYERS OF PAINT

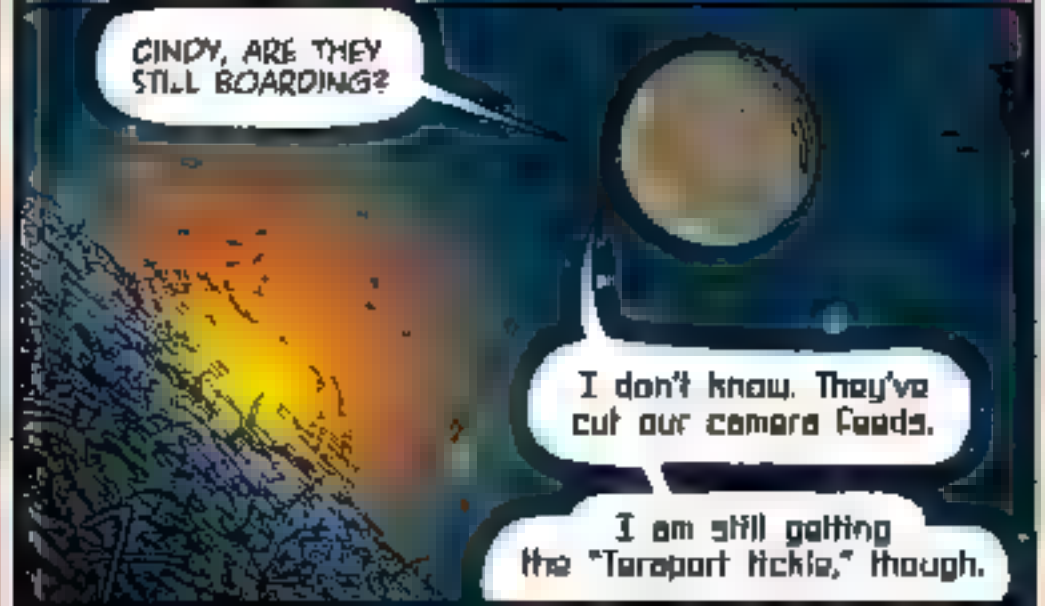
FROM MINIMUM SAFE DISTANCE THE COMPLEXITY OF THE IMPACT EVENT AVERAGES OUT INTO SOMETHING SIMPLE IT IS AN EXPLOSION THAT THROWS DEBRIS.

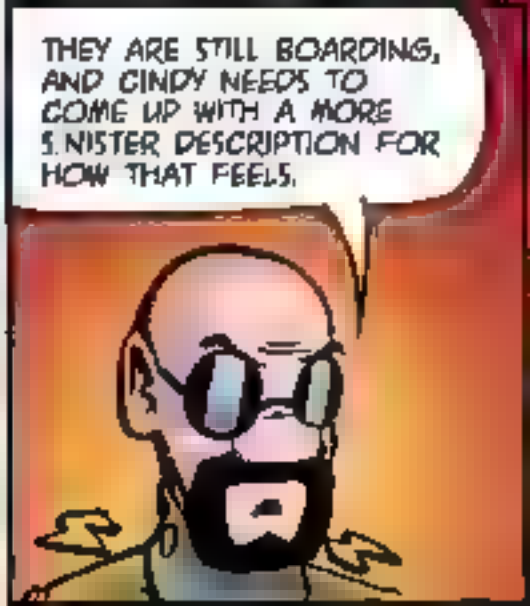
FINDING MINIMUM SAFE DISTANCE IS COMPLICATED

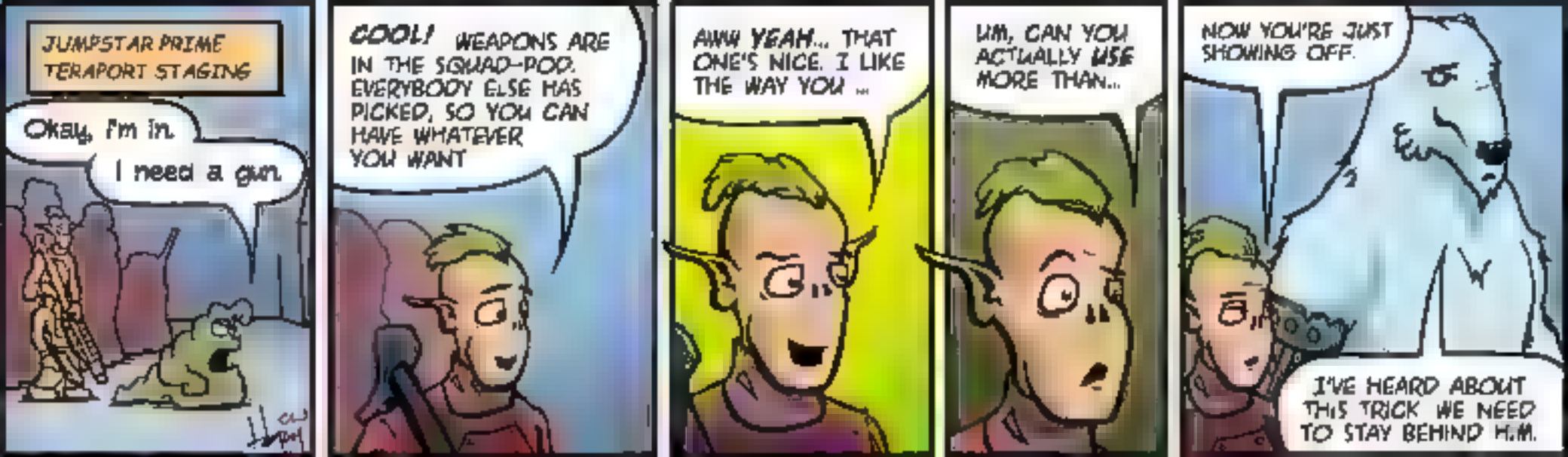
We won't be getting that satellite back, Captain.

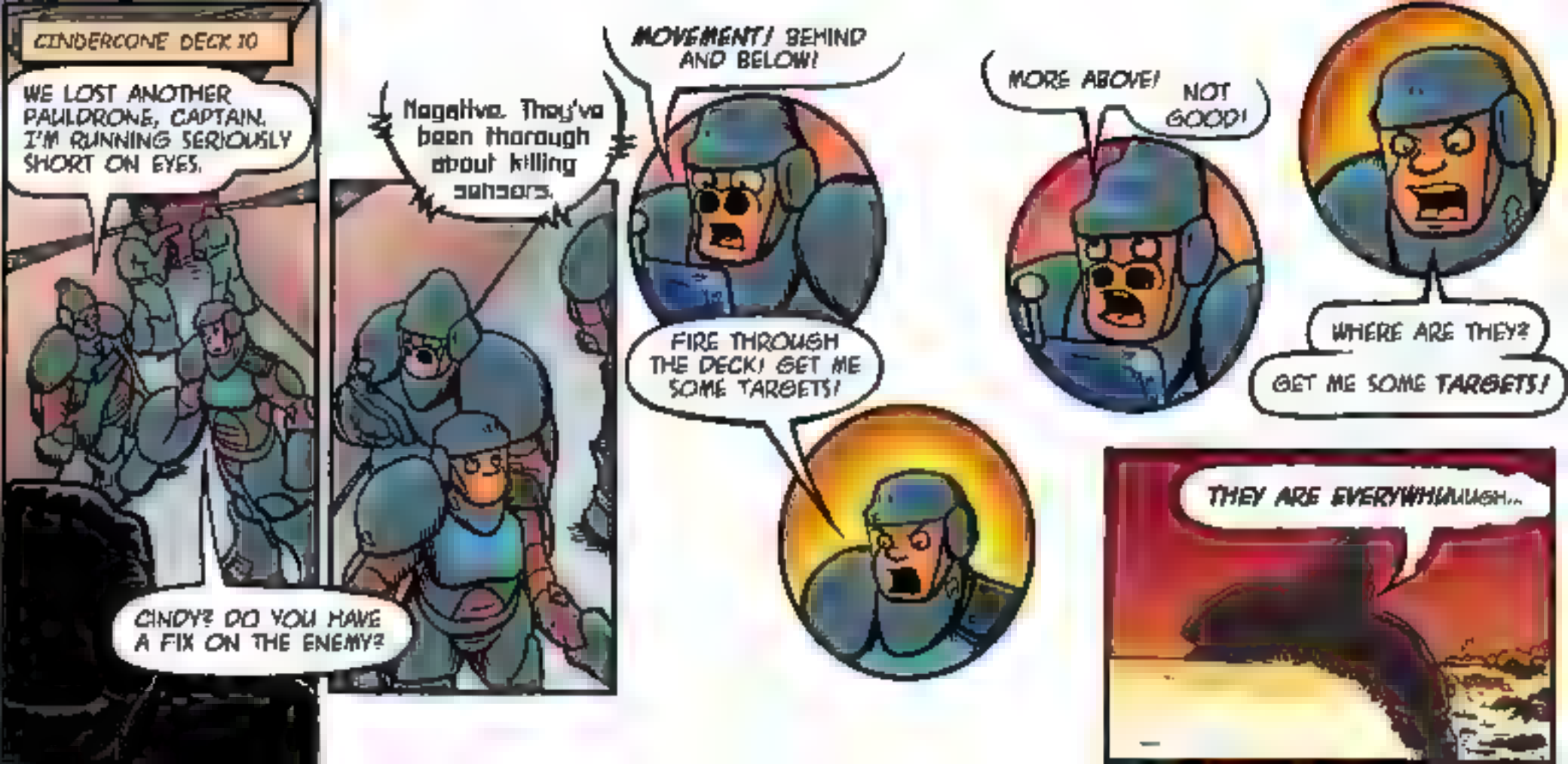
CINDERCONE
IMPACT
CINDY, START PLOTTING TRACKS FOR ULI-OA'S DEBRIS.
SOME OF IT COULD BE COMING DOWN ON THE RESEARCH POD, OR ON THE ESSPEE CITY
What do you plan to do if debris is headed for the Esspees?
SEND THEM A HEADS-UP, AND THEN SIT DOWN WITH A BOWL OF HOT POPCORN.

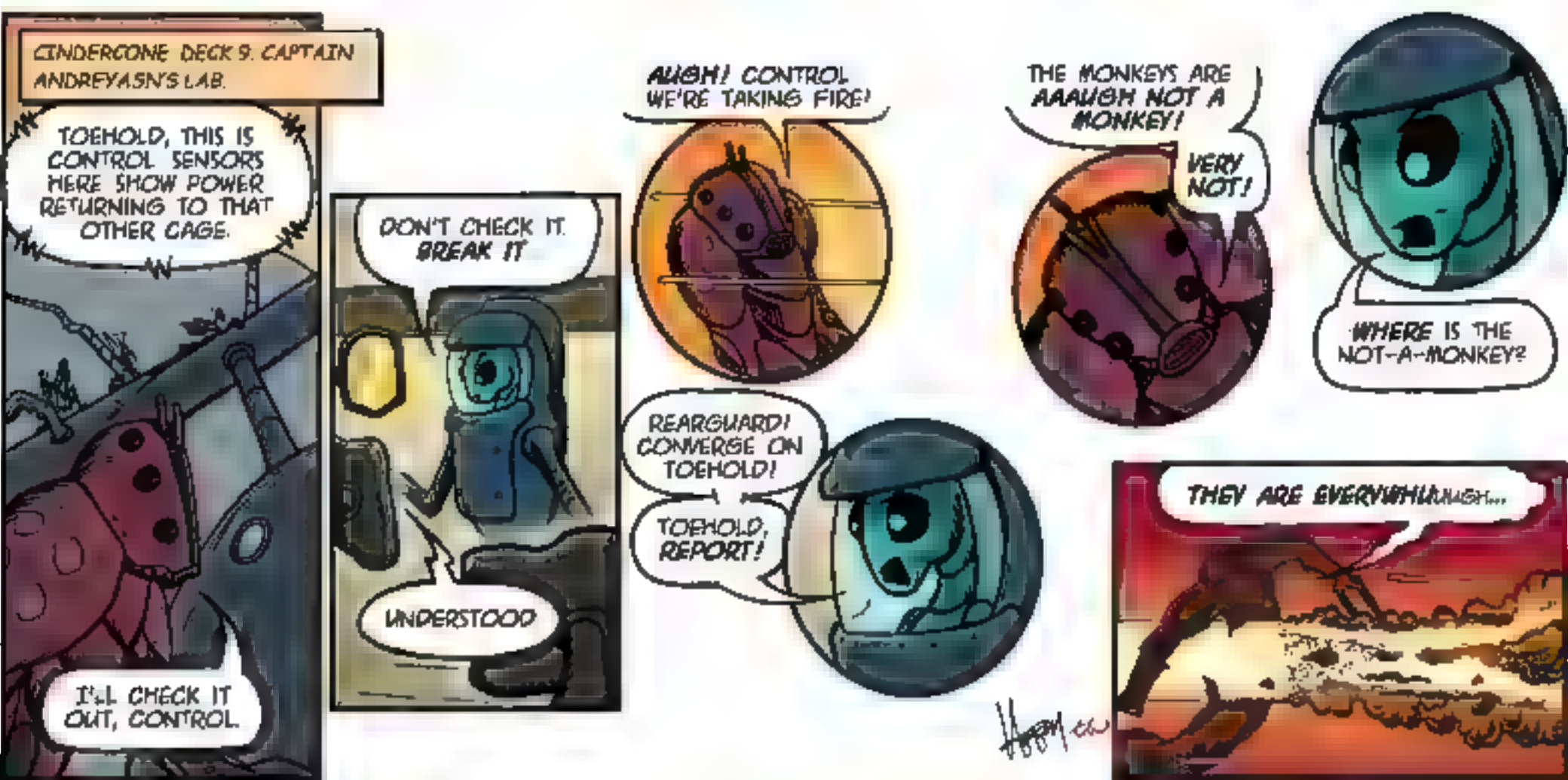
MURTAUGH, ARE YOU ANY CLOSER TO KICKING THOSE ESSPEES OFF MY SHIP?
I DON'T KNOW. ARE THEY STILL BOARDING?

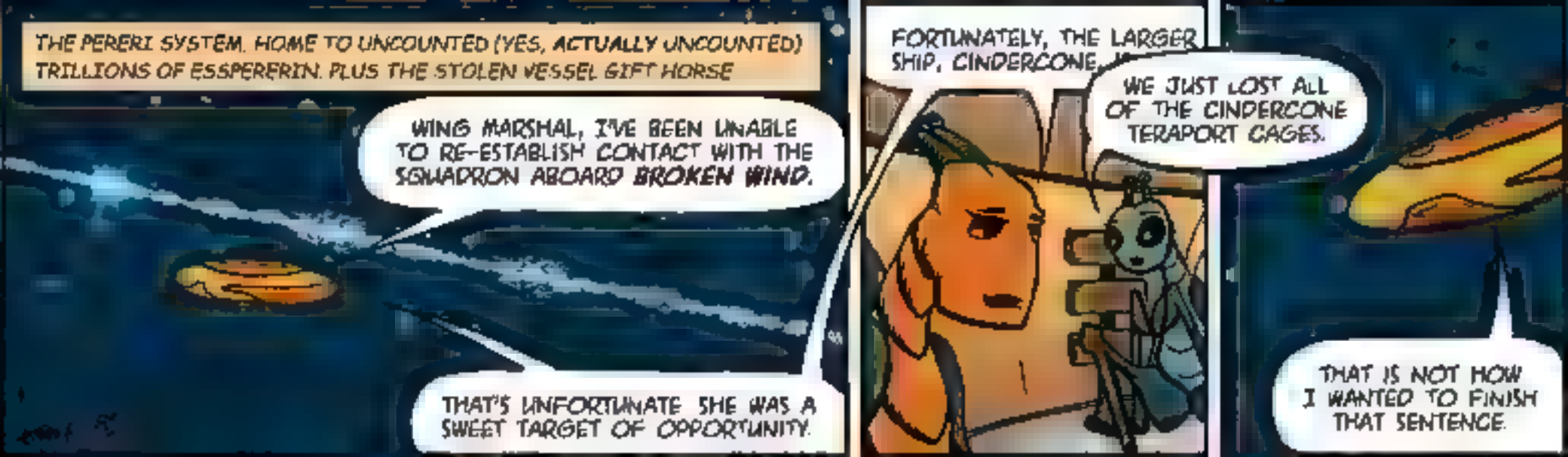

CINDY, ARE THEY STILL BOARDING?
I don't know. They've cut our camera feeds.
I am still getting the "Teleport tickle," though.

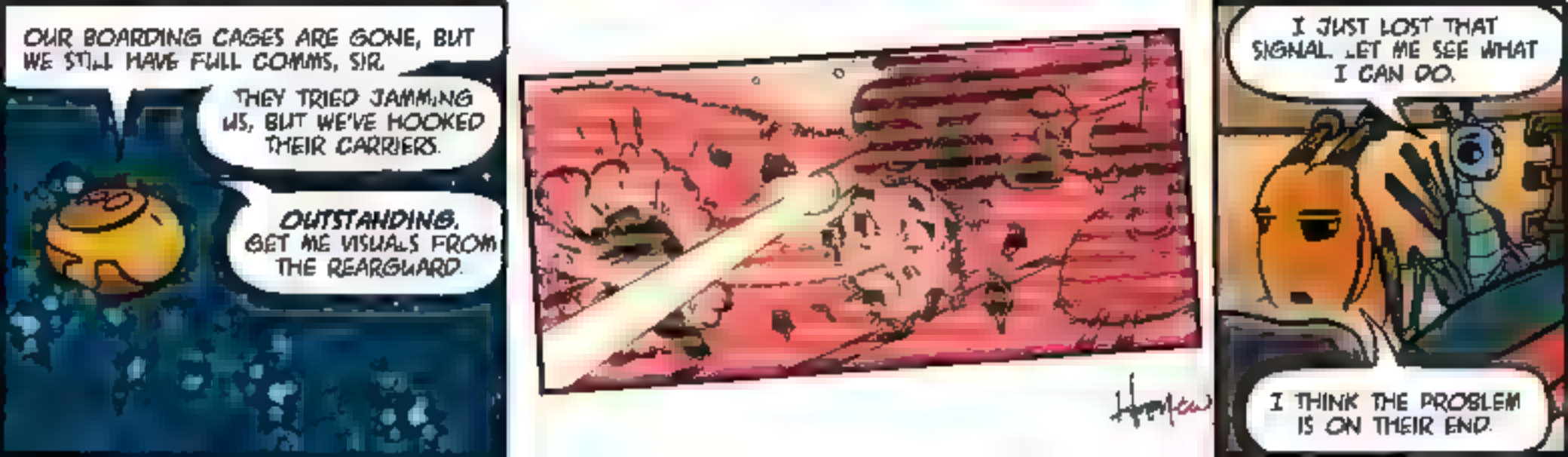

THEY ARE STILL BOARDING, AND CINDY NEEDS TO COME UP WITH A MORE SINISTER DESCRIPTION FOR HOW THAT FEELS.

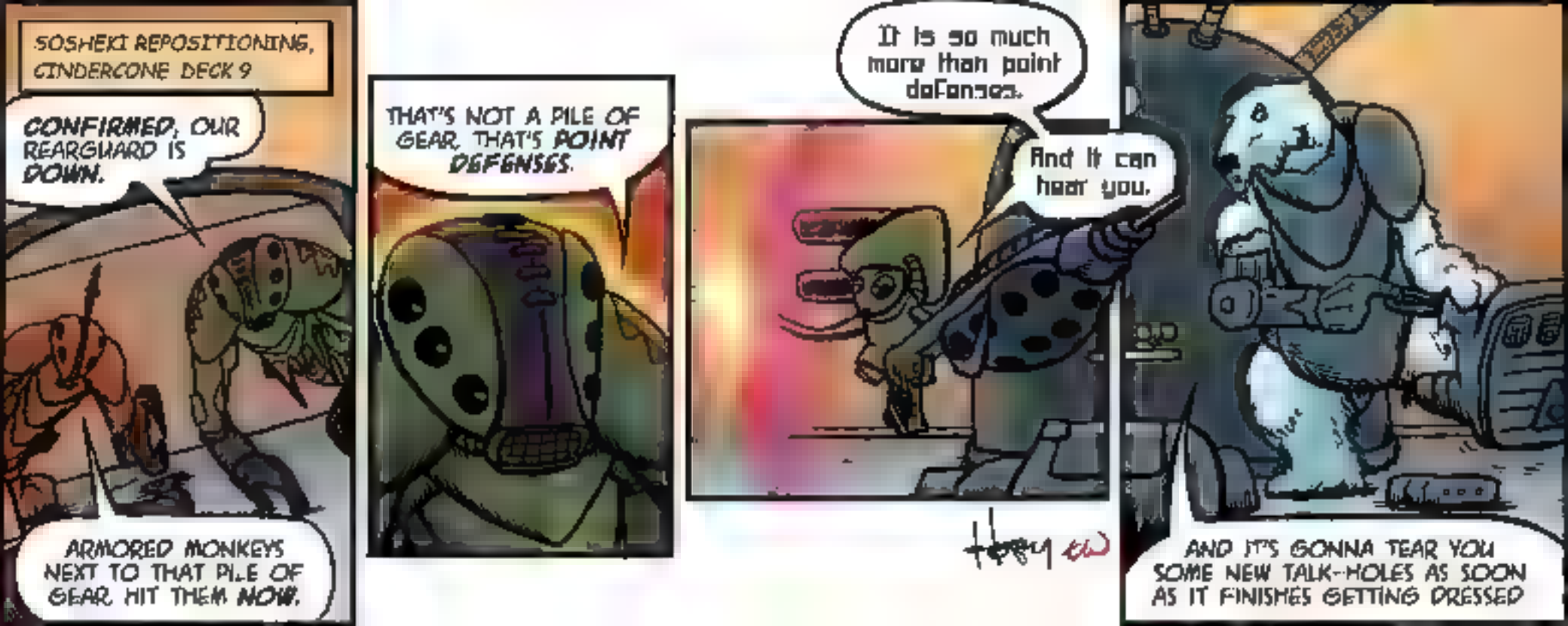

JUMPSTAR PRIME
TERAPORT STAGING
Okay, I'm in.
I need a gun.
COOL! WEAPONS ARE IN THE SQUAD-POD. EVERYBODY ELSE HAS PICKED, SO YOU CAN HAVE WHATEVER YOU WANT
AWW YEAH... THAT ONE'S NICE. I LIKE THE WAY YOU ...
UM, CAN YOU ACTUALLY USE MORE THAN...
NOW YOU'RE JUST SHOWING OFF.
I'VE HEARD ABOUT THIS TRICK. WE NEED TO STAY BEHIND H.M.


CINDERCONE DECK 10
WE LOST ANOTHER PAULDRONE, CAPTAIN. I'M RUNNING SERIOUSLY SHORT ON EYES.
CINDY? DO YOU HAVE A FIX ON THE ENEMY?
Negative. They've been thorough about killing sensors.
MOVEMENT! BEHIND AND BELOW!
FIRE THROUGH THE DECK! GET ME SOME TARGETS!
MORE ABOVE!
NOT GOOD!
WHERE ARE THEY?
GET ME SOME TARGETS!
THEY ARE EVERYWHUUUGH...


CINDERCONE DECK 9. CAPTAIN ANDREYASN'S LAB.
TOEHOLD, THIS IS CONTROL SENSORS HERE SHOW POWER RETURNING TO THAT OTHER CAGE.
I'LL CHECK IT OUT, CONTROL.
DON'T CHECK IT. BREAK IT
UNDERSTOOD
AUGH! CONTROL WE'RE TAKING FIRE!
REARGUARD! CONVERGE ON TOEHOLD!
TOEHOLD, REPORT!
THE MONKEYS ARE AAAUGH NOT A MONKEY!
VERY NOT!
WHERE IS THE NOT-A-MONKEY?
THEY ARE EVERYWHUUUGH...


THE PERERI SYSTEM. HOME TO UNCOUNTED (YES, ACTUALLY UNCOUNTED) TRILLIONS OF ESSPERERIN. PLUS THE STOLEN VESSEL GIFT HORSE
WING MARSHAL, I'VE BEEN UNABLE TO RE-ESTABLISH CONTACT WITH THE SQUADRON ABOARD BROKEN WIND.
THAT'S UNFORTUNATE. SHE WAS A SWEET TARGET OF OPPORTUNITY.
FORTUNATELY, THE LARGER SHIP, CINDERCONE,
WE JUST LOST ALL OF THE CINDERCONE TERAPORT CAGES.
THAT IS NOT HOW I WANTED TO FINISH THAT SENTENCE.

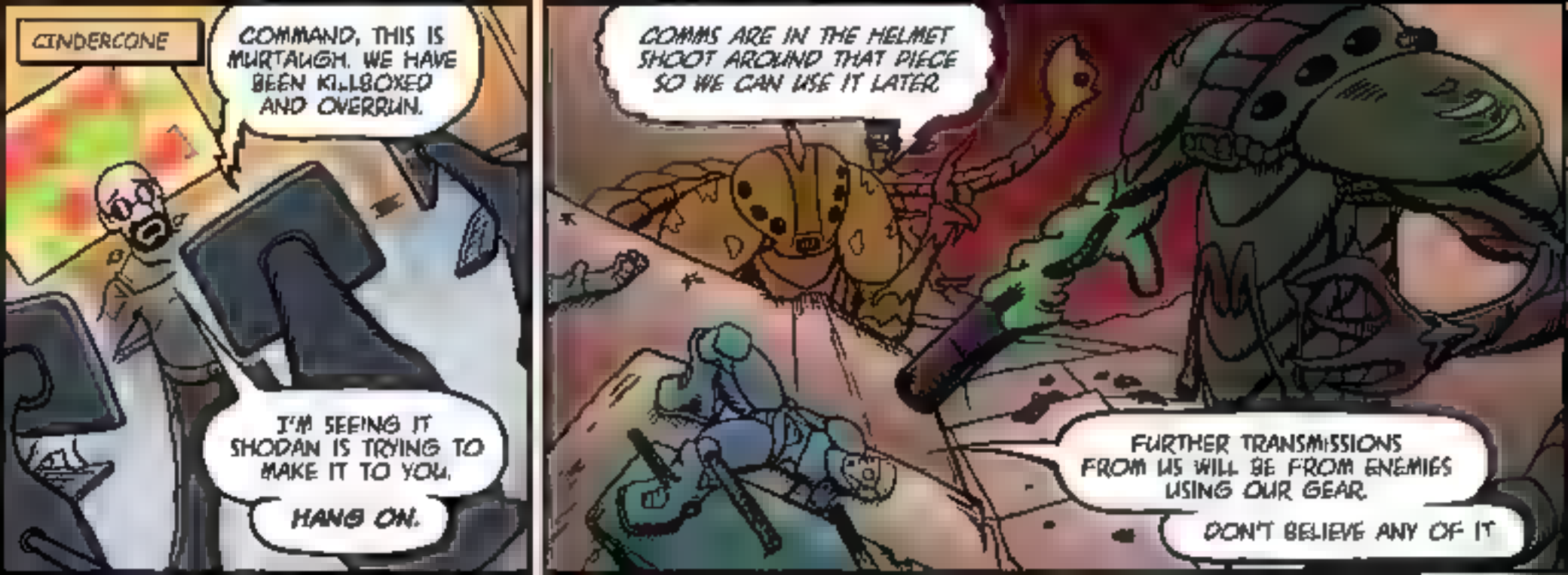

OUR BOARDING CAGES ARE GONE, BUT WE STILL HAVE FULL COMMS, SIR.
THEY TRIED JAMMING US, BUT WE'VE HOOKED THEIR CARRIERS.
OUTSTANDING. GET ME VISUALS FROM THE REARGUARD.
I JUST LOST THAT SIGNAL. LET ME SEE WHAT I CAN DO.
I THINK THE PROBLEM IS ON THEIR END.


SOSHEKI REPOSITIONING, CINDERCONE DECK 9
CONFIRMED, OUR REARGUARD IS DOWN.
ARMORED MONKEYS NEXT TO THAT PILE OF GEAR HIT THEM NOW.
THAT'S NOT A PILE OF GEAR. THAT'S POINT DEFENSES.
It is so much more than point defenses.
And it can hear you.
AND IT'S GONNA TEAR YOU SOME NEW TALK-HOLES AS SOON AS IT FINISHES GETTING DRESSED

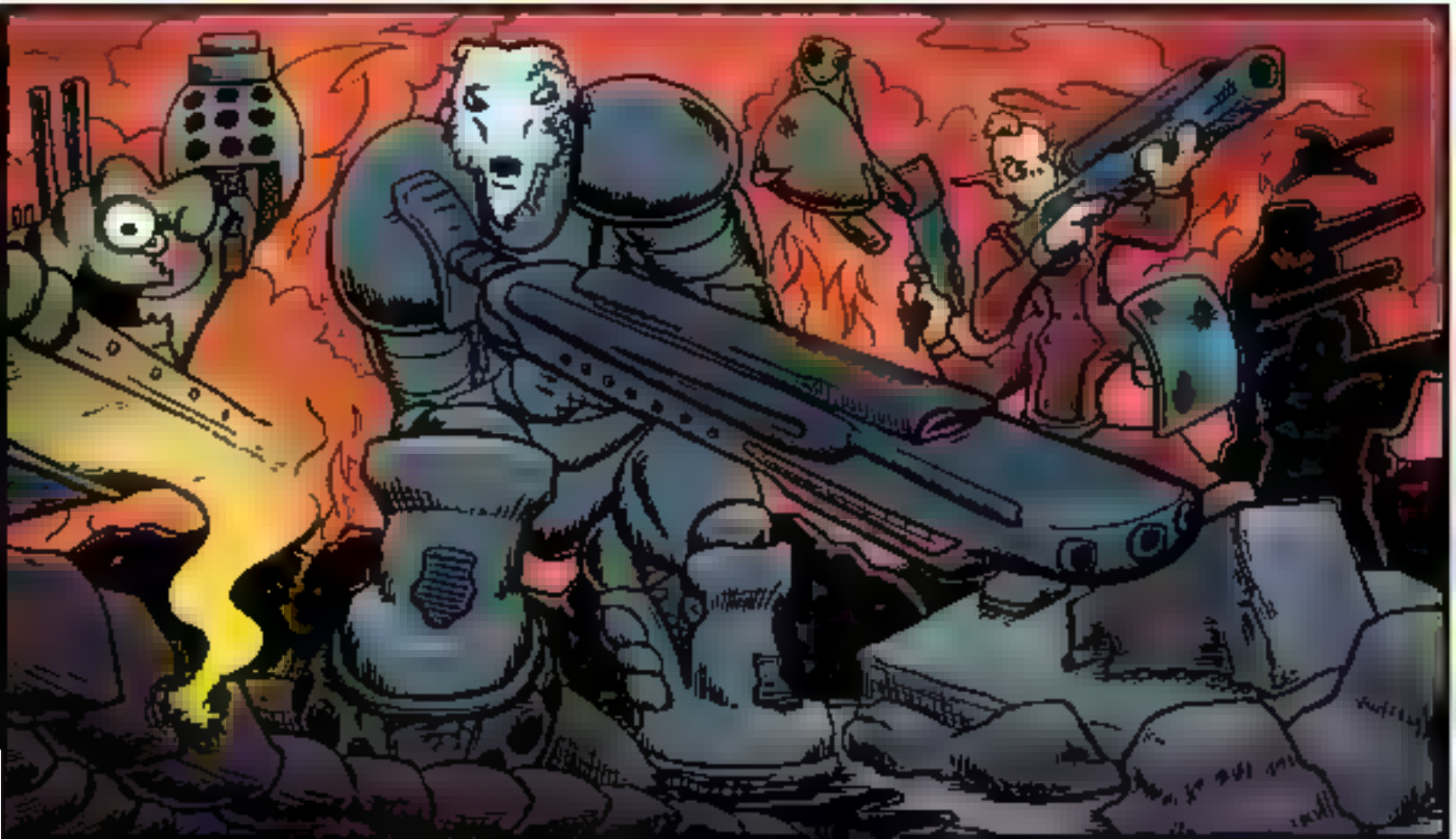
BROKEN WIND..
COMMODORE, WE'VE GOT FIRES TO PUT OUT
THAT WAS THE LAST OF THEM, KATHLEEN.
NO, THEY'RE STILL BURNING.
AND MY NAME IS KATHRYN.
AND YOU'VE NEVER GOTTEN THAT WRONG BEFORE.
I'VE BEEN WRONG A LOT SO MUCH WRONG.
I'M GLAD YOU SEE THAT, BUT WE SHOULD DO THE AFTER-ACTION STUFF AFTER THE ACTION.

KATHRYN...THE COMMODORE'S FILE SAYS HIS WIFE'S NAME WAS KATHLEEN.
OH, NO...
I THOUGHT HE WAS BROKEN BEFORE, BUT NOW HE'S ACTUALLY BROKEN-BROKEN.
AGREED. I DECLARE FOR THE RECORD THAT COMMODORE KARL TAGON IS TEMPORARILY UNFIT FOR DUTY.
I AM AWAITING ORDERS, ACTING CAPTAIN FLINDERS.
NO NO NO.
YOU CAN'T DO THAT.
THE HANDBOOKS SAY I HAVE TO DO THAT

I CAN'T BE ACTING CAPTAIN. I NEED TO SIT WITH KAR- I MEAN THE COMMODORE HE NEEDS SOMEONE NEXT TO HIM.
HE NEEDS NINETY MINUTES OF DREAMLESS UNCONSCIOUSNESS WHILE WE PUT OUT THE FIRES.
AND SINCE I DON'T HAVE A SYRINGE FOR FIRE SUPPRESSION
KATHRYN, I'VE SEEN YOU DO "BOSSY AND UNSTOPPABLE."
ARMOR THOSE OVARIES AND BOSS UP.


CINDERCONE
COMMAND, THIS IS MURTAUGH. WE HAVE BEEN KILLBOXED AND OVERRUN.
I'M SEEING IT SHODAN IS TRYING TO MAKE IT TO YOU.
HANG ON.
COMMS ARE IN THE HELMET SHOOT AROUND THAT PIECE SO WE CAN USE IT LATER.
FURTHER TRANSMISSIONS FROM US WILL BE FROM ENEMIES USING OUR GEAR.
DON'T BELIEVE ANY OF IT

BOOM
BOOM



WHAT IF I WANT TO BELIEVE?
YOUR VOICE MEANS I'M NOT DEAD.
BUT I'M STILL SEEING ANGELS.

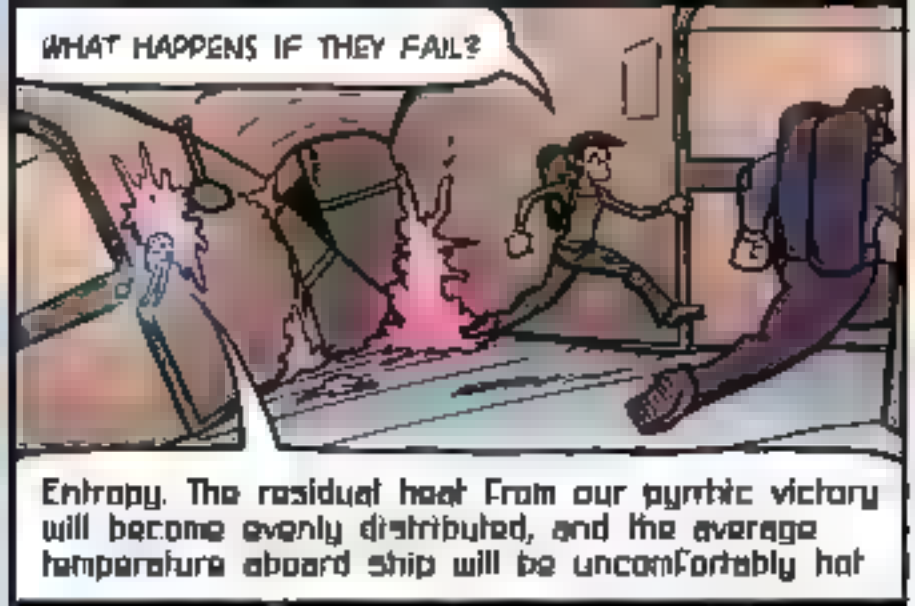
TANDERSIL, GET THESE PEOPLE TO MEDICAL.
YES, SIR.
ANY IDEA WHICH WAY THAT IS?
I can help.
OUTSTANDING.
TANDERSIL, GET DIRECTIONS FROM THE A.I.
You and I have a minor point of order to clear up first, Captain Landon.
ERR...
OH! PERMISSION TO COME ABOARD?
Granted. Please make yourselves at home.

I think we got all of the big ones, but the little guys are still crawling around everywhere.
WE'LL RUN SOME SWEEPS. TENZY, YOU'RE SPOTTING.
Dearest Captain, These things are tiny. I can do far more than spot
THEY'RE ALSO MECHANIC SAVANTS. YOU SHOULDN'T BE TOUCHING THEM.
If I don't touch them how am I supposed to eat them?
YOU ARE A TERRIBLE INFLUENCE.
I haven't eaten any of them.

JUMPSTAR PRIME.
WHERE IS CAPTAIN LANDON?
I DON'T KNOW, AMBASSADOR.
DO YOU NOT KNOW BECAUSE HE DIDN'T TELL YOU, OR BECAUSE HE TOLD YOU NOT TO KNOW?
I UM.. DON'T KNOW?
BUT YOU DID SEE HIM WHEN HE LEFT THE EMBASSY ARMORY WITH TWO FULLY-LOADED ASSAULT PODS?
NOPE. HE CALLED AHEAD AND TOLD ME TO LOOK THE OTHER WAY

CHINOOK, YOU HAVE EYES EVERYWHERE. CERTAINLY YOU KNOW WHERE MY SECURITY CHIEF, CAPTAIN LANDON, HAS GONE?
AND WHY HE TOOK A PAIR OF ASSAULT PODS WITH HIM?
He is leading a makeshift band of mercenaries on a boarding operation.
HOW DOES THAT RELATE TO HIS JOB PROVIDING SECURITY FOR MY EMBASSY?
His report will be a work of art.
THEN HE'S GOING TO GET TO SUFFER FOR HIS ART

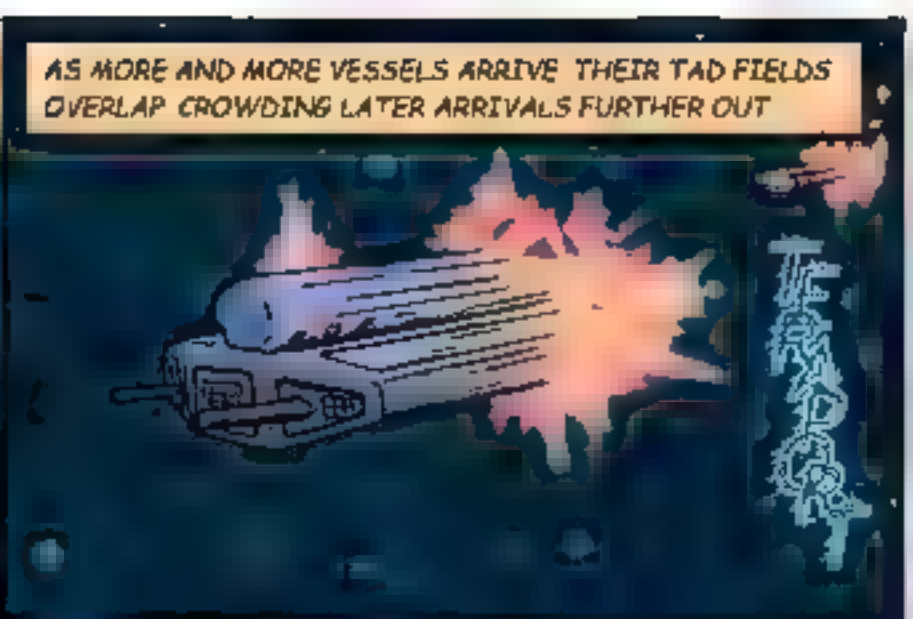
BROKEN WIND.
Captain, I don't think Tagon considered the strain on our heat pumps. They are beginning to fail.


WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY FAIL?
Entropy. The residual heat from our pyrrhic victory will become evenly distributed, and the average temperature aboard ship will be uncomfortably hot

UNCOMFORTABLE FOR WHO?
Anybody who might be inconvenienced by the water boiling out of their blood.

ALL HANDS TO BAY FOUR! WE ARE EVACUATING THE SHIP!
IAFA, ONCE WE'RE CLEAR, OPEN ALL THE HATCHES, BAY DOORS, WEAPON PORTS... EVERYTHING.
Radiating heat into the vacuum of space is not going to solve this heat problem.
AND THEN SUBMERGE BROKEN WIND IN ULI-OA'S OCEAN.
That is going to make an incalculably amazing mess.
PICK A PATCH OF OCEAN THAT ISN'T ALREADY BOILING.

THE FABRIC OF SPACE SHIMMERS AS INBOUND TERAPORTS RIP THEN PATCH GIGA-TRILLIONS OF WORMHOLES
TERAPORT
EACH ARRIVING VESSEL QUICKLY PROJECTS TERAPORT AREA DENIAL FIELDS KEEPING NEARBY SPACE SECURELY NON-SHIMMERING

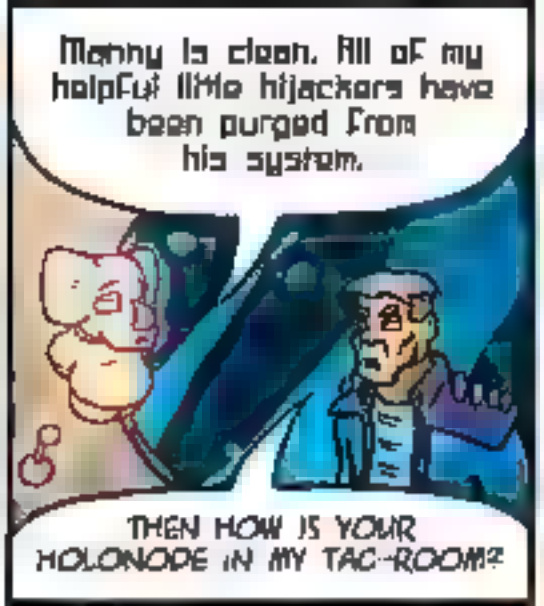

AS MORE AND MORE VESSELS ARRIVE THEIR TAD FIELDS OVERLAP CROWDING LATER ARRIVALS FURTHER OUT
TERAPORT

MOST OF THEM ARRIVE AT SPEED, RUSHING TOWARD ULI-OA, PASSING FREELY THROUGH SPACE WHERE TERAPORTS ARE NOT POSSIBLE

"FREE PASSAGE" ENDS AT THE SCREEN OF DEFENSES LAID BY THE U.N.S. FLEETS.

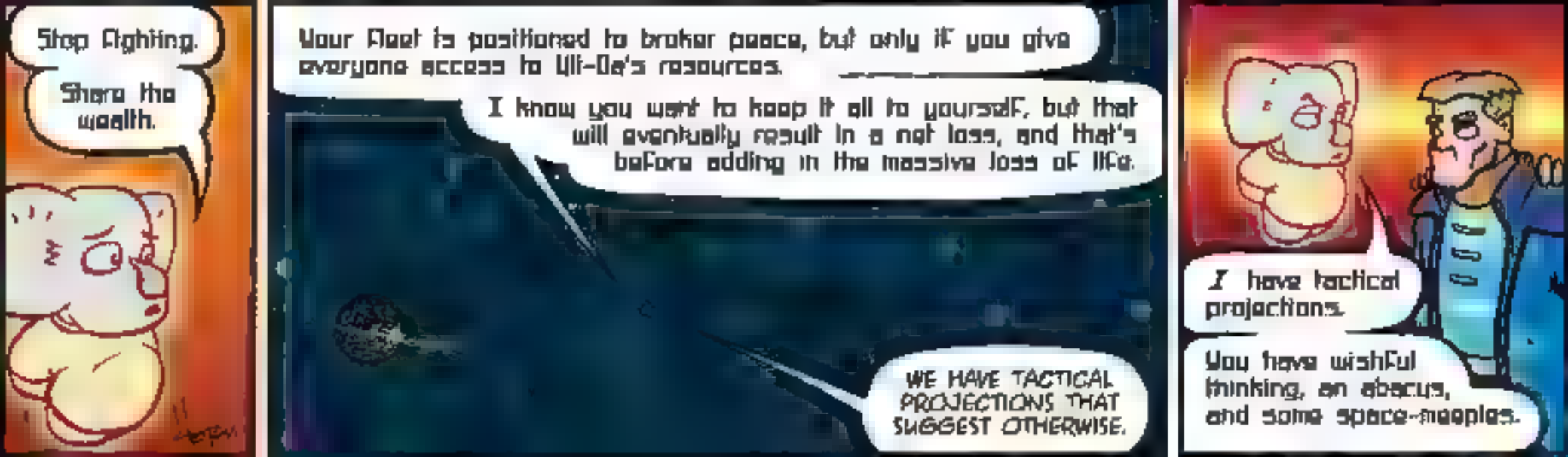
THE PRICE INCREASE BETWEEN "FREE" AND "NOT FREE" IS STEEP

MANICOUAGAN STATION-KEEPING NEAR ULI OA
Hello again, Admiral.
MON DIEU!
MANNY, I THOUGHT WE GOT YOU CLEAN!


Manny is clean. All of my helpful little hijackers have been purged from his system.
THEN HOW IS YOUR HOLONODE IN MY TAC-ROOM?

If I tell you, it will spoil the trick, and you'll stop calling me "god" when I show up unannounced.
THAT'S NOT WHAT "MON DIEU" MEANS.
Really?

I have a favor to ask, Admiral.
I DON'T RECALL YOU EARNING A QUID-PRO-QUO.
I haven't, but you're about to.
AM I?
I really hope so.


Stop fighting.
Share the wealth.
Your fleet is positioned to broker peace, but only if you give everyone access to Ull-Oa's resources.
I know you want to keep it all to yourself, but that will eventually result in a net loss, and that's before adding in the massive loss of life.
WE HAVE TACTICAL PROJECTIONS THAT SUGGEST OTHERWISE.
I have tactical projections.
You have wishful thinking, an abacus, and some space-meeples.

When I took Dixit, my intervention saved thousands of lives, and I accomplished it without killing anyone.

Including you.

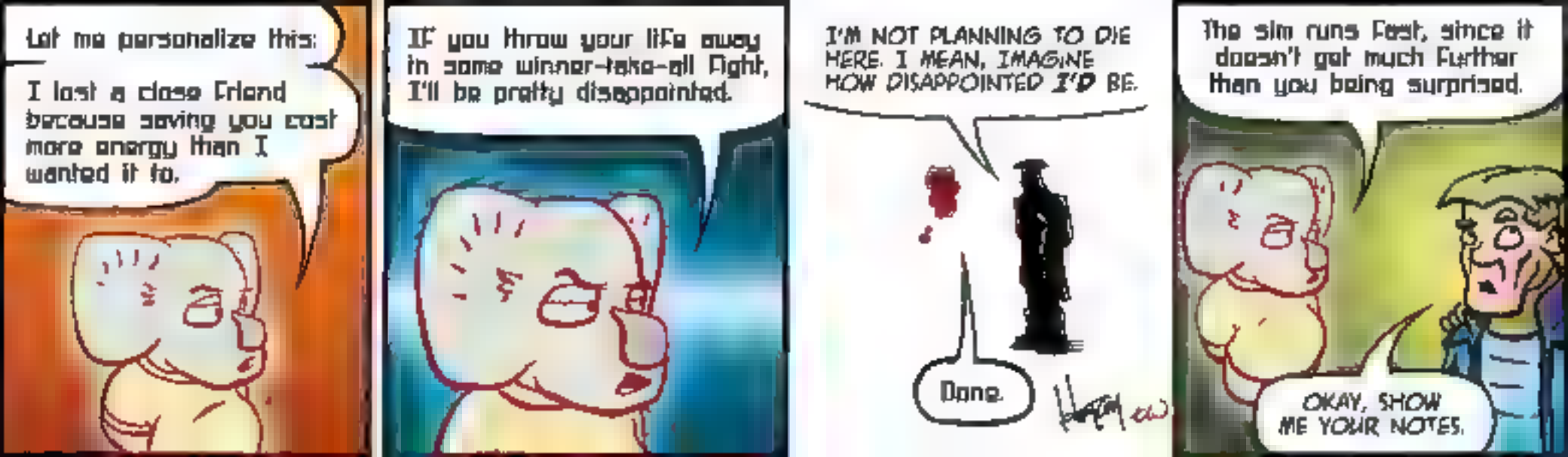
Right now you're preparing to end almost every life I set out to preserve.

IF YOU'RE THAT UPSET ABOUT IT, GET IN HERE AND START MEDDLING AGAIN.

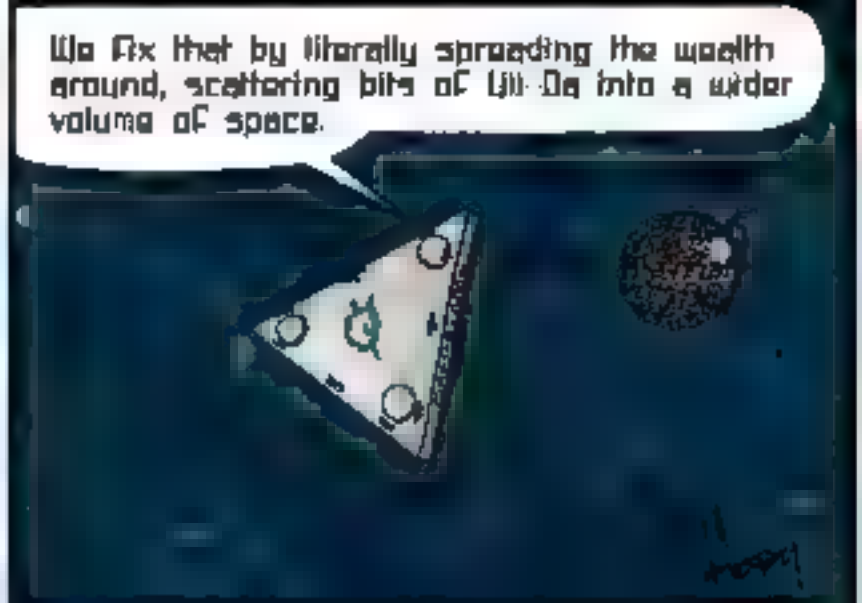
What do you think this conversation is?

FRUITLESS. WHAT DID YOU THINK IT WOULD BE?

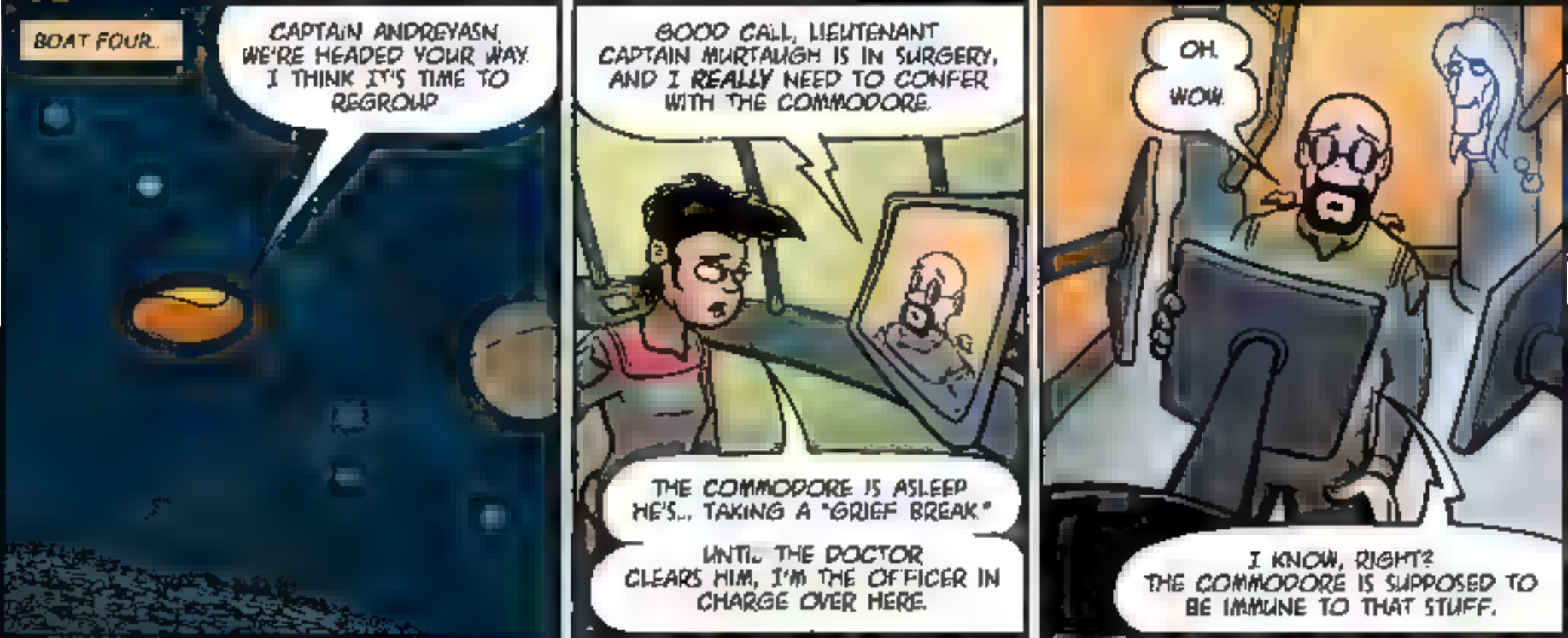
I was hoping for some fruit.

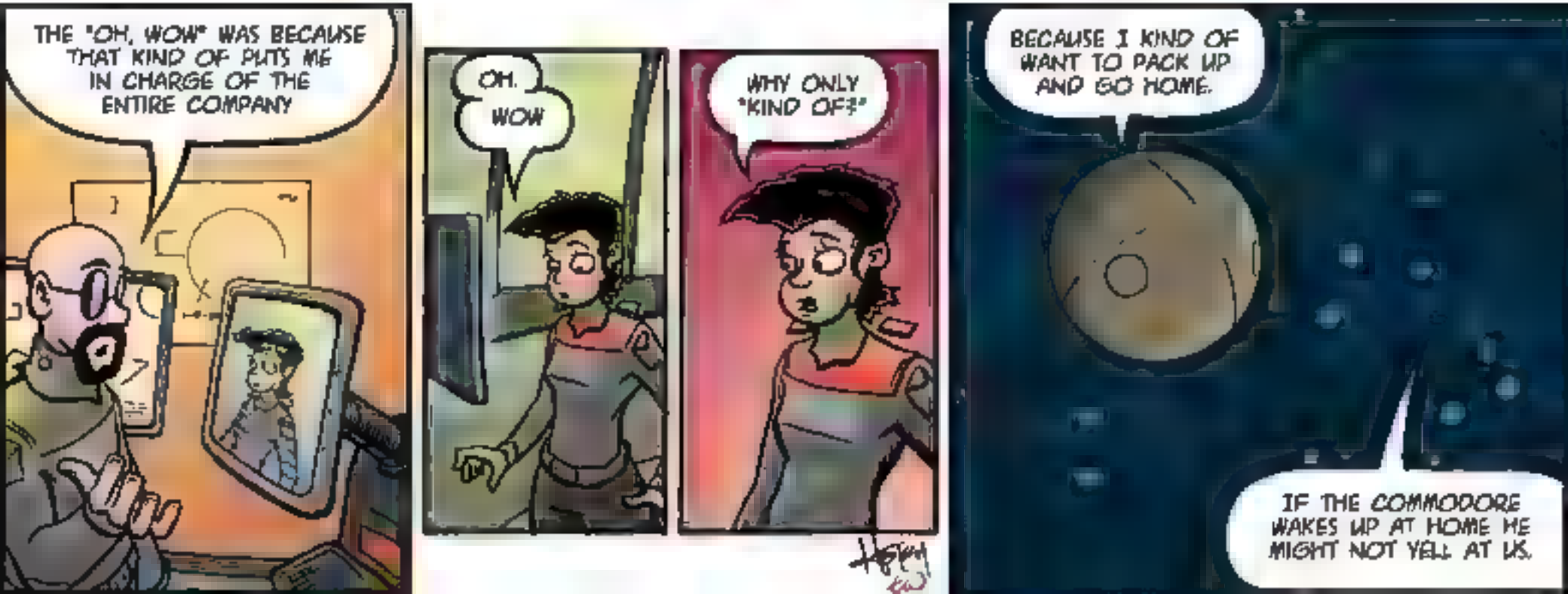

Let me personalize this:
I lost a close friend because saving you cost more energy than I wanted it to.
If you throw your life away in some winner-take-all fight, I'll be pretty disappointed.
I'M NOT PLANNING TO DIE HERE. I MEAN, IMAGINE HOW DISAPPOINTED I'D BE.
Done.
The sim runs fast, since it doesn't get much further than you being surprised.
OKAY, SHOW ME YOUR NOTES.

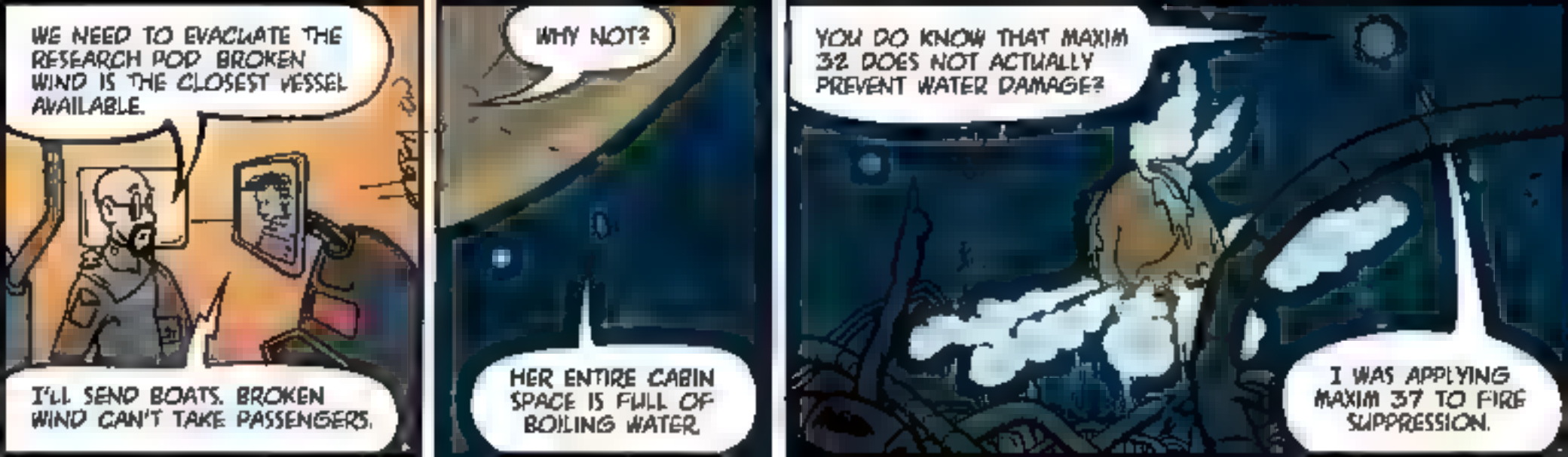
PETEY, SHARING SOUNDS NICE, BUT ULI-OA IS A NATURAL CHOKE-POINT SOMEBODY WILL GET GREEDY, SEE AN OPPORTUNITY, AND START SHOOTING.

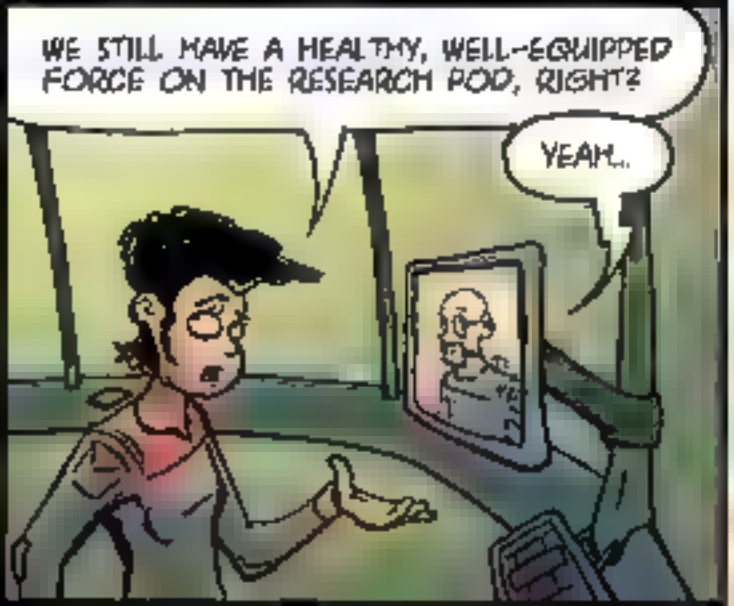

We fix that by literally spreading the wealth around, scattering bits of Uli-Oa into a wider volume of space.

THE IMPACTOR...
THAT WAS YOU?
It's true. Recent exertions have reduced me to simply throwing rocks.


BOAT FOUR.
CAPTAIN ANDREYASN, WE'RE HEADED YOUR WAY. I THINK IT'S TIME TO REGROUP
GOOD CALL, LIEUTENANT CAPTAIN MURTAUGH IS IN SURGERY, AND I REALLY NEED TO CONFER WITH THE COMMODORE.
THE COMMODORE IS ASLEEP HE'S... TAKING A "GRIEF BREAK."
UNTIL THE DOCTOR CLEARS HIM, I'M THE OFFICER IN CHARGE OVER HERE.
OH.
WOW.
I KNOW, RIGHT? THE COMMODORE IS SUPPOSED TO BE IMMUNE TO THAT STUFF.

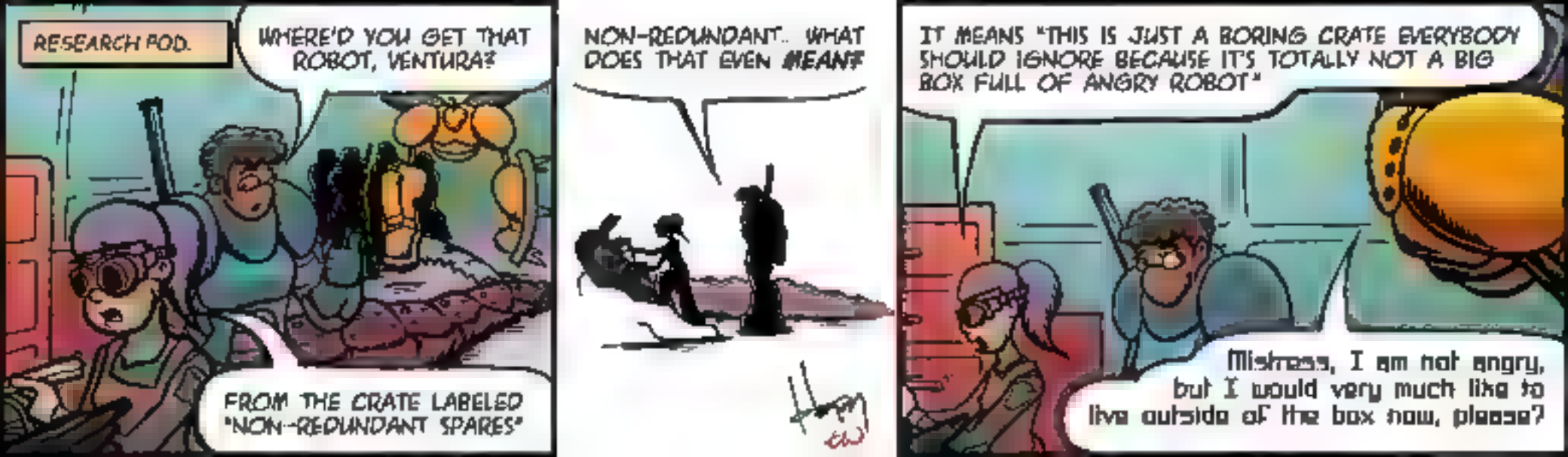

THE "OH, WOW" WAS BECAUSE THAT KIND OF PUTS ME IN CHARGE OF THE ENTIRE COMPANY
OH. WOW
WHY ONLY "KIND OF?"
BECAUSE I KIND OF WANT TO PACK UP AND GO HOME.
IF THE COMMODORE WAKES UP AT HOME HE MIGHT NOT YELL AT US.


WE NEED TO EVACUATE THE RESEARCH POD. BROKEN WIND IS THE CLOSEST VESSEL AVAILABLE.
I'LL SEND BOATS. BROKEN WIND CAN'T TAKE PASSENGERS.
WHY NOT?
HER ENTIRE CABIN SPACE IS FULL OF BOILING WATER.
YOU DO KNOW THAT MAXIM 32 DOES NOT ACTUALLY PREVENT WATER DAMAGE?
I WAS APPLYING MAXIM 37 TO FIRE SUPPRESSION.

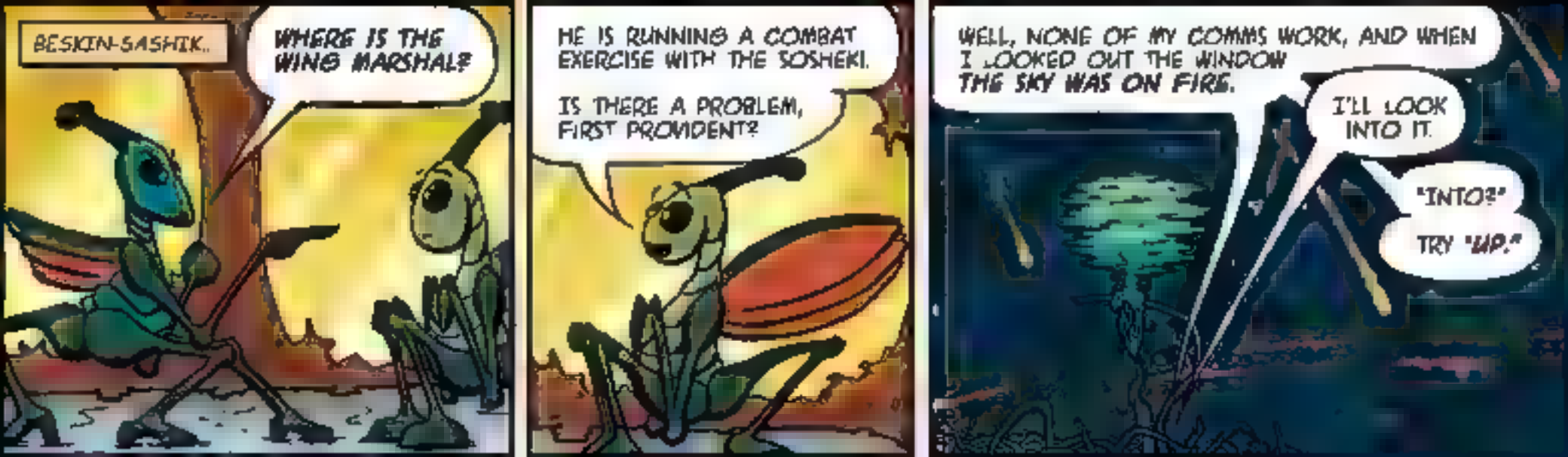

WE STILL HAVE A HEALTHY, WELL-EQUIPPED FORCE ON THE RESEARCH POD, RIGHT?
YEAH...

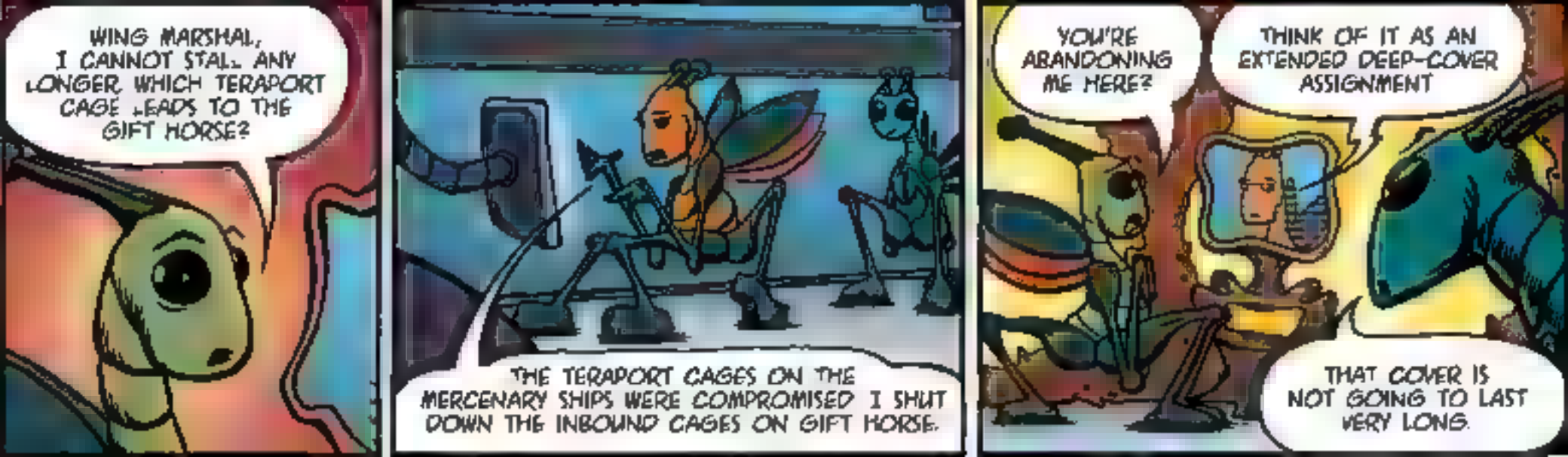
AND WE HAVE A CONTRACT WITH THE ESSPEES WHICH IS IN DIRE NEED OF RE-NEGOTIATION.
WE DO..

We're not done sweeping. Why is Kevyr doing the scary face?


RESEARCH POD.
WHERE'D YOU GET THAT ROBOT, VENTURA?
FROM THE CRATE LABELED "NON-REDUNDANT SPARES"
NON-REDUNDANT... WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?
IT MEANS "THIS IS JUST A BORING CRATE EVERYBODY SHOULD IGNORE BECAUSE IT'S TOTALLY NOT A BIG BOX FULL OF ANGRY ROBOT"
Mistress, I am not angry, but I would very much like to live outside of the box now, please?

SUIT UP, RELOAD, AND GRAB ANYTHING YOU WANT TO KEEP
WE ARE LEAVING.
HOW LONG DO I HAVE BEFORE EVACUATION?
WE'RE NOT EVACUATING.
WE ARE DEPLOYING.
AH. CAN I HAVE TWENTY MORE MINUTES?
AM I GOING TO REGRET GIVING THEM TO YOU?
NOT IF THEY'RE AWESOME MINUTES.


BESKIN-SASHIK..
WHERE IS THE WING MARSHAL?
HE IS RUNNING A COMBAT EXERCISE WITH THE SOSHEKI.
IS THERE A PROBLEM, FIRST PROVIDENT?
WELL, NONE OF MY COMMS WORK, AND WHEN I LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW THE SKY WAS ON FIRE.
I'LL LOOK INTO IT.
"INTO?"
TRY "UP."

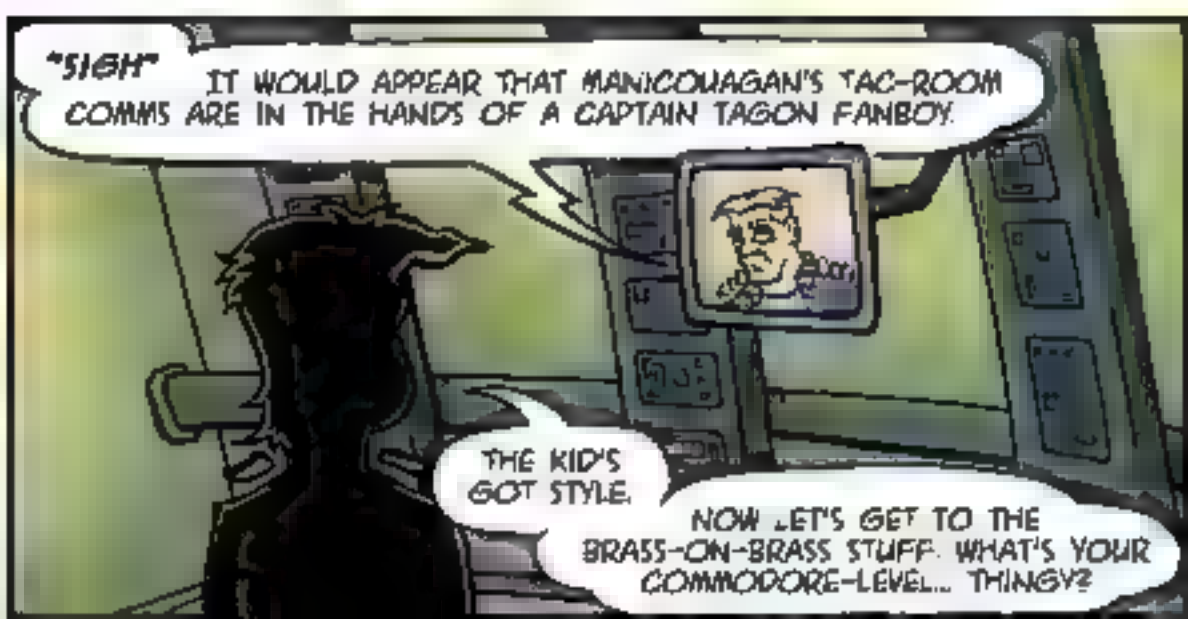

WING MARSHAL, I CANNOT STALL ANY LONGER. WHICH TERAPORT CAGE LEADS TO THE GIFT HORSE?
THE TERAPORT CAGES ON THE MERCENARY SHIPS WERE COMPROMISED. I SHUT DOWN THE INBOUND CAGES ON GIFT HORSE.
YOU'RE ABANDONING ME HERE?
THINK OF IT AS AN EXTENDED DEEP-COVER ASSIGNMENT
THAT COVER IS NOT GOING TO LAST VERY LONG.

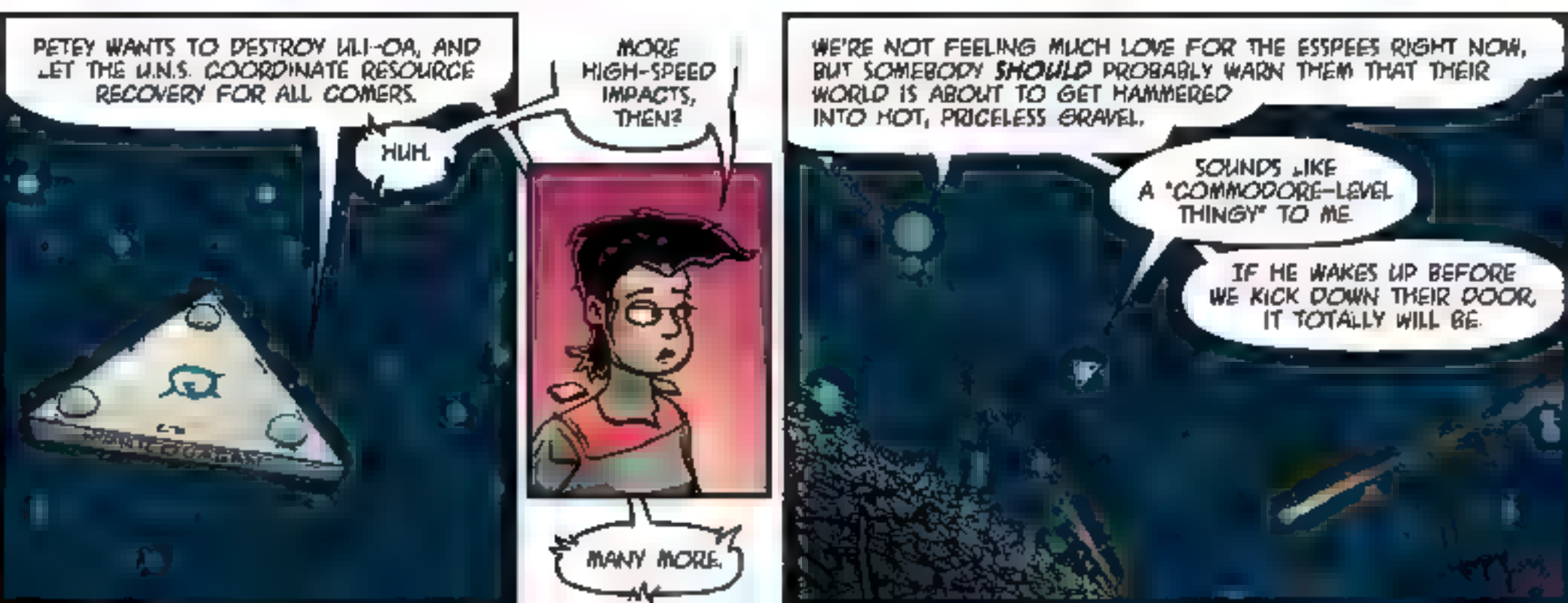
ULI-OA ORBIT
BROKEN WIND, THIS IS MANICOUAGAN SIX ACTUAL. TO WHOM AM I SPEAKING?
I AM ACTING CAPTAIN KATHRYN FLINDERS.
HOW MIGHT I BE OF SERVICE TO YOU, ADMIRAL DEVEREAUX?
I NEED TO SPEAK WITH COMMODORE TAGON.

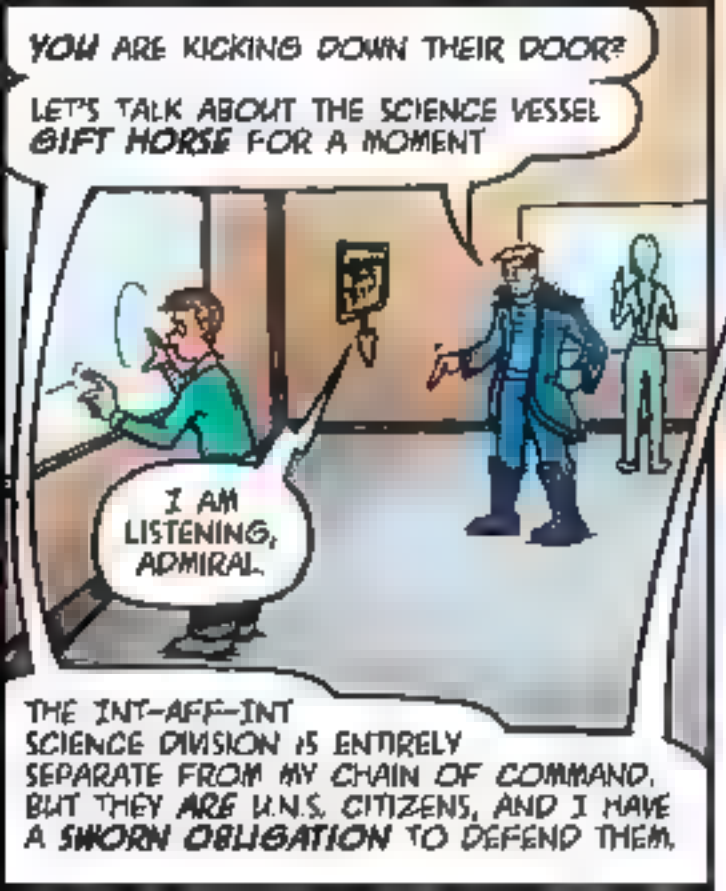
HE IS CURRENTLY INDISPOSED. HIS SON'S DEATH HIT HIM PRETTY HARD

IT'S TRUE THEN? CAPTAIN TAGON IS DEAD?
IT'S TRUE.

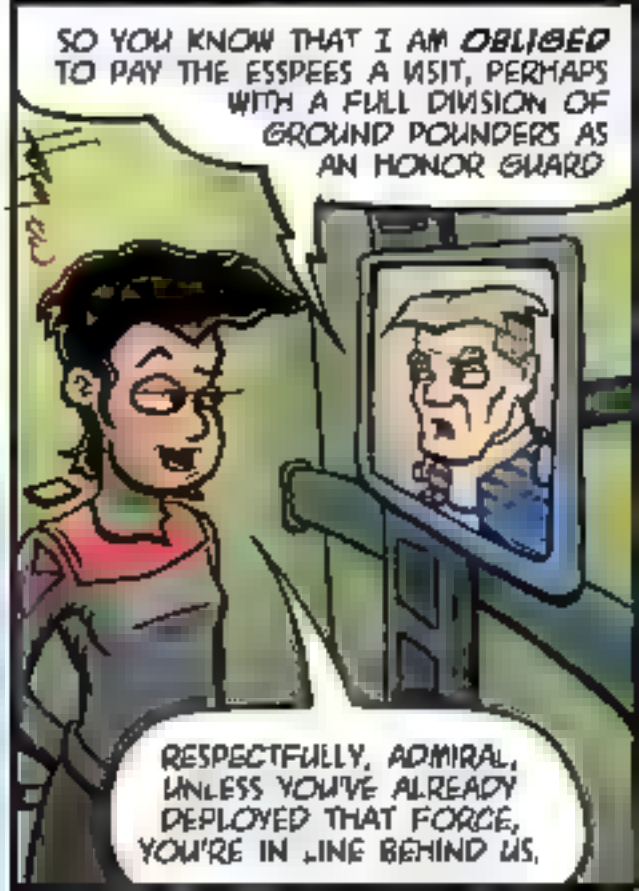
OH. I'M VERY SORRY FOR YOUR
NOOOOOOOO

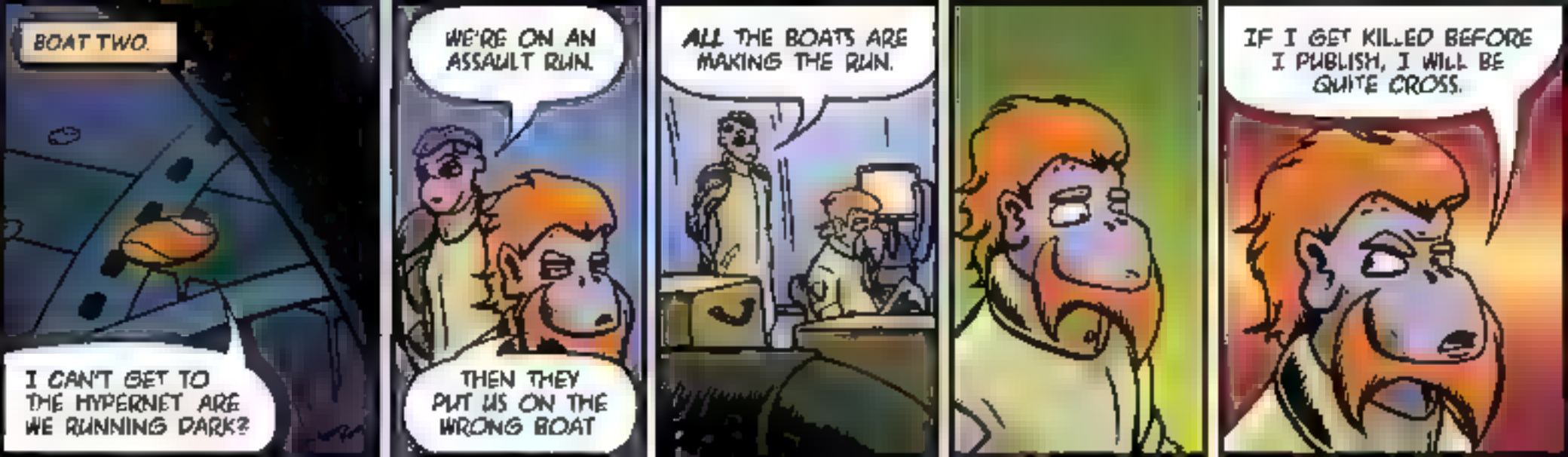

"SIGH"
IT WOULD APPEAR THAT MANICOUAGAN'S TAC-ROOM COMMS ARE IN THE HANDS OF A CAPTAIN TAGON FANBOY.
THE KID'S GOT STYLE.
NOW LET'S GET TO THE BRASS-ON-BRASS STUFF. WHAT'S YOUR COMMODORE-LEVEL... THINGY?


PETEY WANTS TO DESTROY ULI-OA, AND LET THE U.N.S. COORDINATE RESOURCE RECOVERY FOR ALL COMERS.
HUH.
MORE HIGH-SPEED IMPACTS, THEN?
MANY MORE.
WE'RE NOT FEELING MUCH LOVE FOR THE ESSPEES RIGHT NOW, BUT SOMEBODY SHOULD PROBABLY WARN THEM THAT THEIR WORLD IS ABOUT TO GET HAMMERED INTO HOT, PRICELESS GRAVEL.
SOUNDS LIKE A "COMMODORE-LEVEL THINGY" TO ME.
IF HE WAKES UP BEFORE WE KICK DOWN THEIR DOOR, IT TOTALLY WILL BE.


YOU ARE KICKING DOWN THEIR DOOR?
LET'S TALK ABOUT THE SCIENCE VESSEL GIFT HORSE FOR A MOMENT
I AM LISTENING, ADMIRAL.
THE INT-AFF-INT SCIENCE DIVISION IS ENTIRELY SEPARATE FROM MY CHAIN OF COMMAND. BUT THEY ARE U.N.S. CITIZENS, AND I HAVE A SWORN OBLIGATION TO DEFEND THEM.

SIX OF THE SCIENTISTS, AND ALL FIFTEEN CREW MEMBERS HAVE FAILED TO RESPOND TO EMERGENCY PERSONAL TRANSPONDER PINGS
I SERVED ON THE TUNGUSKA. I KNOW WHAT E.P.T.P SILENCE MEANS.


SO YOU KNOW THAT I AM OBLIGED TO PAY THE ESSPEES A VISIT, PERHAPS WITH A FULL DIVISION OF GROUND POUNDERS AS AN HONOR GUARD
RESPECTFULLY, ADMIRAL, UNLESS YOU'VE ALREADY DEPLOYED THAT FORCE, YOU'RE IN LINE BEHIND US.


BOAT TWO.
I CAN'T GET TO THE HYPERNET ARE WE RUNNING DARK?
WE'RE ON AN ASSAULT RUN.
THEN THEY PUT US ON THE WRONG BOAT
ALL THE BOATS ARE MAKING THE RUN.
IF I GET KILLED BEFORE I PUBLISH, I WILL BE QUITE CROSS.

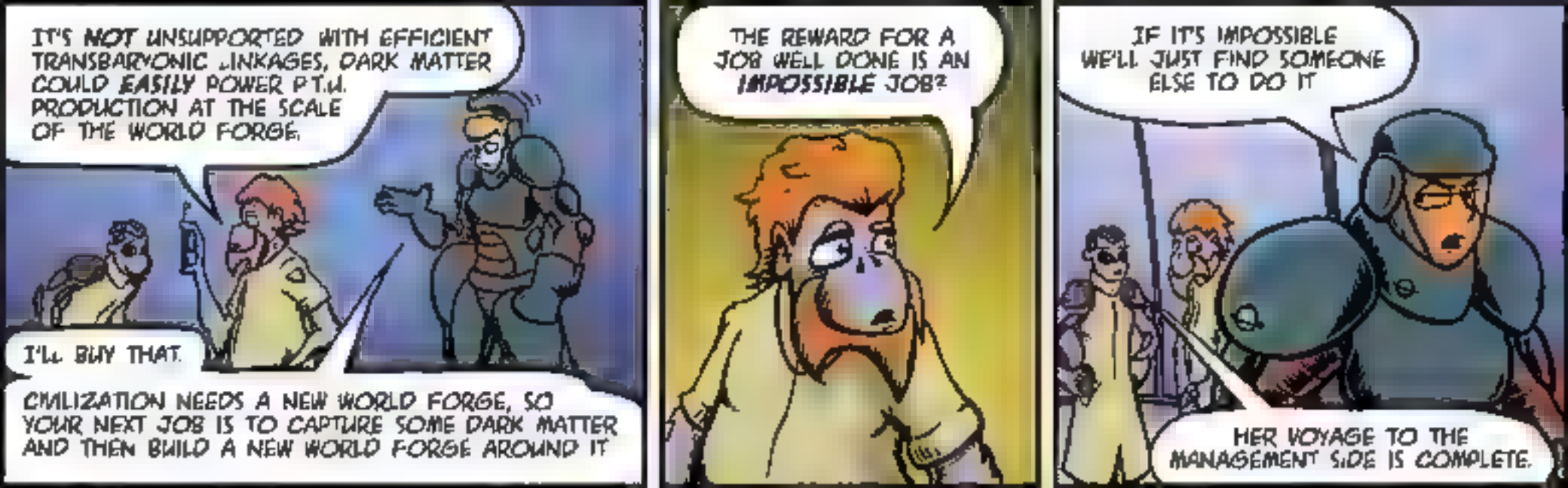
DID THE SONAR DATA CONFIRM OUR GRAVY-GUN THEORY?
NOPE. ULI-OA DID COLLAPSE UNDER STEEP, RAPIDLY SHIFTING GRAVITATIONAL GRADIENTS, BUT NOT FROM GRAVY GUNS.
WHAT, THEN?
GUESS.
IF WE GET KILLED BEFORE YOU TELL ME, I WILL BE QUITE CROSS.
GO AHEAD AND MAKE HER ANGRY I LIKE HER WHEN SHE'S ANGRY

WE'VE SEEN CRUSH PATTERNS VERY SIMILAR TO ULI-OA'S BEFORE THE BATTLEPLATES MOROKWENG AND TUNGUSKA BOTH DIED THIS WAY
GRANTED, THOSE WERE MUCH SMALLER SCALE EVENTS, BUT... HEH.
"HEH?"
NERVOUS LAUGH. IT'S DISCOMFITING TO CONSIDER THE DESTRUCTION OF A BATTLEPLATE AS A SMALL SCALE EVENT
YES, THE UNIVERSE IS REALLY BIG. HURRY UP AND GET OVER IT

THE WORLD FORGE WAS CRUSHED FROM WITHIN BY A DARK MATTER ENTITY.
THIS ISN'T ACTUALLY SURPRISING, GASCA. WE ALL FIGURED IT WAS DESTROYED DURING THE PA'ANURI WARS.

EXCEPT THAT THE DESTRUCTION ORIGINATED AT THE CENTER OF MASS. A PA'ANURI ATTACK WOULD HAVE SPEARED INWARD FIRST, CREATING SHEAR LINES AND RIPPLES OF WHICH THERE ARE NO TRACES.
SO.. A STEALTHY PA'ANURI SNUCK INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE STRUCTURE BEFORE LAUNCHING ITS ATTACK.

OR. THE PA'ANURI POWERING THE WORLD FORGE BROKE ITS TRANSBARYONIC CHAINS, THREW OFF THE YOKE OF OPPRESSION, AND SMASHED EVERYTHING ON ITS WAY TO FREEDOM.
FROM SCIENTIST TO NOVELIST IN ONE UNSUPPORTED LEAP

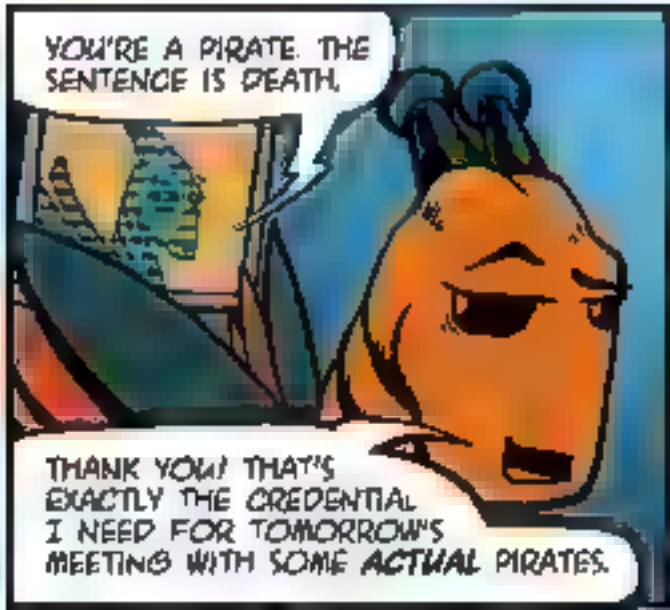

IT'S NOT UNSUPPORTED WITH EFFICIENT TRANSBARYONIC LINKAGES, DARK MATTER COULD EASILY POWER P.T.U. PRODUCTION AT THE SCALE OF THE WORLD FORGE.
I'LL BUY THAT.
CIVILIZATION NEEDS A NEW WORLD FORGE, SO YOUR NEXT JOB IS TO CAPTURE SOME DARK MATTER AND THEN BUILD A NEW WORLD FORGE AROUND IT
THE REWARD FOR A JOB WELL DONE IS AN IMPOSSIBLE JOB?
IF IT'S IMPOSSIBLE WE'LL JUST FIND SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT
HER VOYAGE TO THE MANAGEMENT SIDE IS COMPLETE.

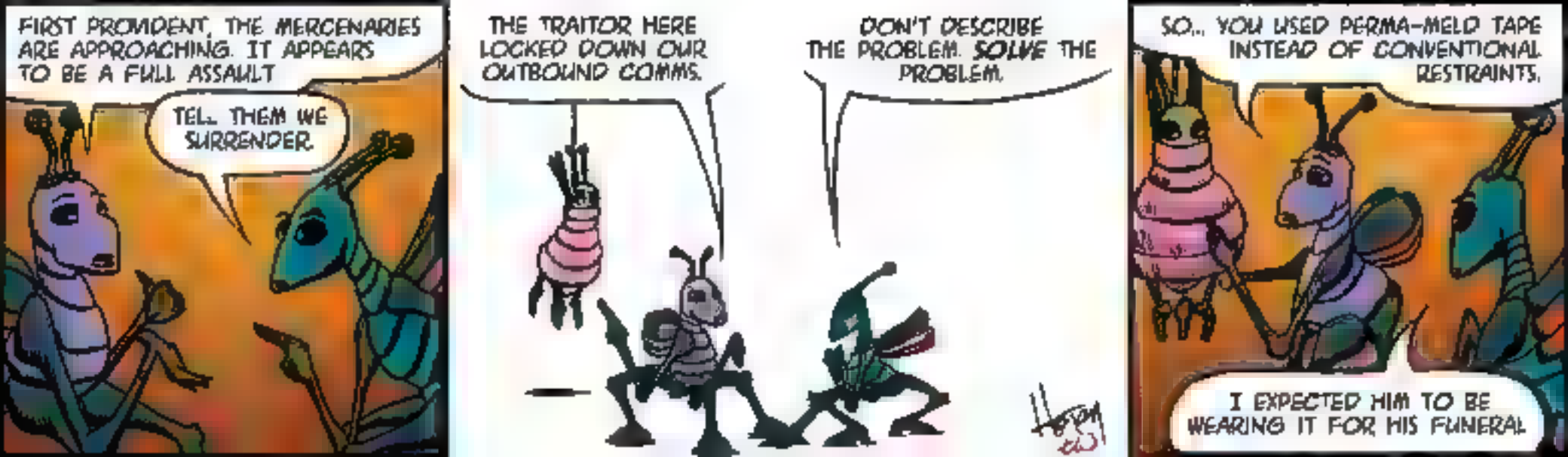
BESKIN-SASHIK
WING MARSHAL, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
PERERI SYSTEM
I HAVE TAKEN RESOURCES FROM THE WEAK, AND SECURED OUR FUTURE.
SWEET STARLIGHT.. DID YOU STEAL SHIPS FROM THE MERCENARIES?
WE ALMOST HAD ALL THREE OF THEM, BUT ONLY SUCCEEDED IN CLAIMING THE SMALLEST
SO, YOU KNOW, YES.

YOU LAUNCHED AN UNPROVOKED ASSAULT UPON OUR ALLIES!
A FIRST STRIKE.
THE SHINE OF THE MERCENARIES' GREED IS UNMISTAKABLE. THE TOUGHS WOULD EVENTUALLY HAVE TAKEN THE WEALTH OF OUR WORLD BY FORCE.
THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS, AND IMMORAL.
ALL WE HOLD DEAR - OUR CITY, OUR FAMILIES, OUR FUTURES - THEY ALL LIE DEFENSELESS BENEATH A BURNING SKY
YOU HAVE BROKEN THE SACRED COMPACT OF THE WING.
I HAVE NOT, BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT DEFENSELESS.
I LEFT YOU A DOZEN-DOZEN COMBAT ENGINEERS, AND A FULL WING OF SOSHEKI, ALL AT FULL ALERT, PREPARED TO REPEL ANY ASSAULT
WOULD THAT BE THE WING YOU ABANDONED BY SHUTTING DOWN YOUR TERAPORT CAGES?
DOES IT MATTER? THEY WILL DEFEND YOU.

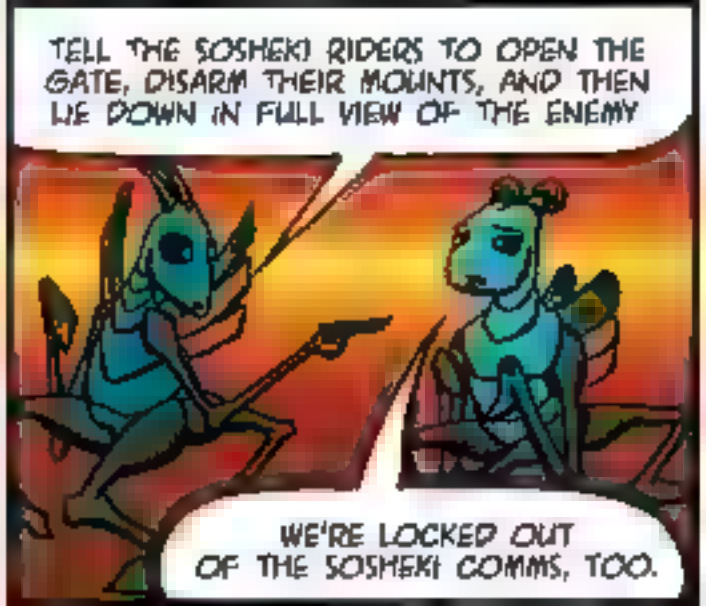
OF COURSE IT MATTERS. YOU ROBBED US, ROBBED OUR ALLIES, AND YOU FORCED EVERYONE HERE INTO WAR.
YOU HAVE VIOLATED THE SACRED COMPACT OF THE WING, AND UNLESS YOU RETURN IMMEDIATELY I WILL PASS SUMMARY JUDGMENT

I AM KIND OF BUSY HERE. A SUMMARY SOUNDS NICE.

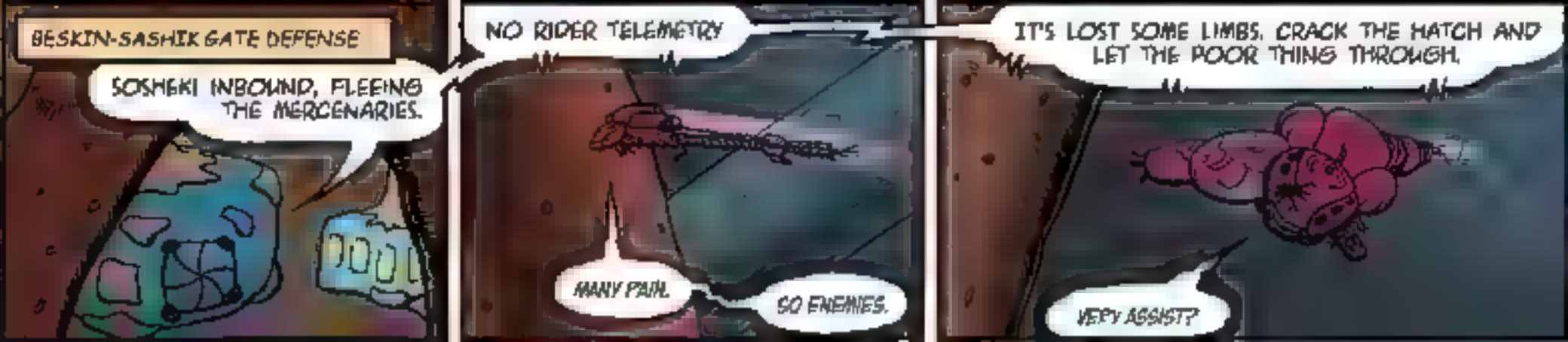

YOU'RE A PIRATE. THE SENTENCE IS DEATH.
THANK YOU! THAT'S EXACTLY THE CREDENTIAL I NEED FOR TOMORROW'S MEETING WITH SOME ACTUAL PIRATES.


FIRST PROVIDENT, THE MERCENARIES ARE APPROACHING. IT APPEARS TO BE A FULL ASSAULT
TELL THEM WE SURRENDER.
THE TRAITOR HERE LOCKED DOWN OUR OUTBOUND COMMS.
DON'T DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM. SOLVE THE PROBLEM.
SO... YOU USED PERMA-MELD TAPE INSTEAD OF CONVENTIONAL RESTRAINTS.
I EXPECTED HIM TO BE WEARING IT FOR HIS FUNERAL

WE WON'T HAVE EXTERNAL COMMS UP FOR ANOTHER SIX MINUTES, SIR.
THAT'S FAR TOO LONG.
WE'LL INDICATE OUR SURRENDER IN THE MANNER OF THE MUTE.

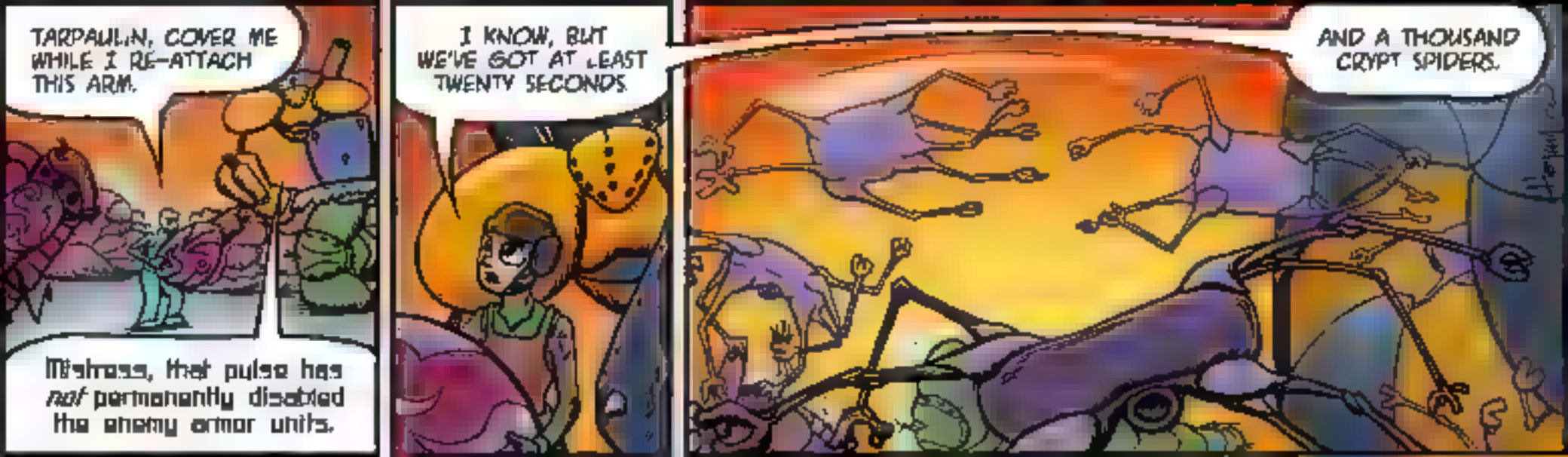

TELL THE SOSHEKI RIDERS TO OPEN THE GATE, DISARM THEIR MOUNTS, AND THEN LIE DOWN IN FULL VIEW OF THE ENEMY
WE'RE LOCKED OUT OF THE SOSHEKI COMMS, TOO.

BESIDES, SOSHEKI WEAPONS DON'T DETACH.
I EXPECT THEY'LL ALL BE DETACHED BEFORE THIS IS OVER.

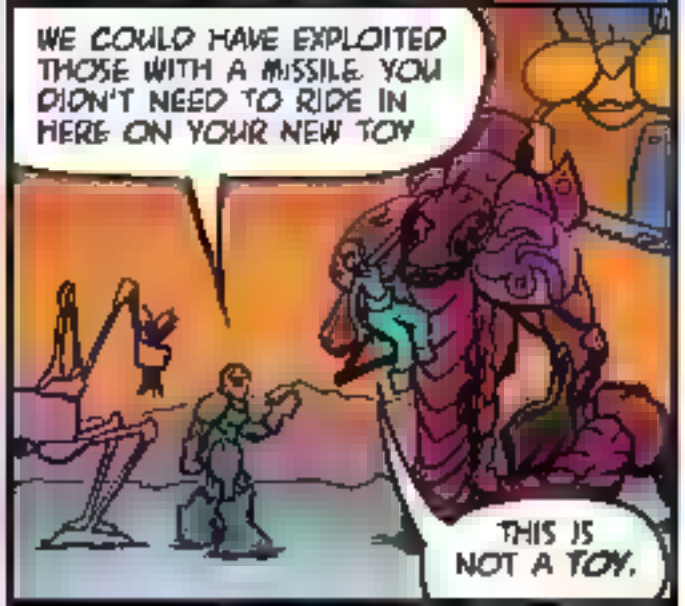

BESKIN-SASHIK GATE DEFENSE
SOSHEKI INBOUND, FLEEING THE MERCENARIES.
NO RIDER TELEMETRY
MANY PAIN.
SO ENEMIES.
IT'S LOST SOME LIMBS. CRACK THE HATCH AND LET THE POOR THING THROUGH.
VERY ASSIST?

PEW
PEW
PEW

"NO RIDER TELEMETRY" ISN'T QUITE THE SAME AS "NO RIDER," BUT THANK YOU FOR THE "VERY ASSIST."


TARPAULIN, COVER ME WHILE I RE-ATTACH THIS ARM.
Mistress, that pulse has *not* permanently disabled the enemy armor units.
I KNOW, BUT WE'VE GOT AT LEAST TWENTY SECONDS.
AND A THOUSAND CRYPT SPIDERS.

TEN MINUTES AFTER TWENTY SECONDS LATER
OKAY, YOU WERE RIGHT THAT WAS AWESOME
IT'S AMAZING WHAT YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH WHEN THE ENEMY HAS EMP-DOS BREAK POINTS.


WE COULD HAVE EXPLOITED THOSE WITH A MISSILE. YOU DIDN'T NEED TO RIDE IN HERE ON YOUR NEW TOY
THIS IS NOT A TOY.

HER NAME IS SILKSILVER, AND SHE'S A GOOD GIRL, ISN'T SHE?
SUCH GOOD
LOVE!

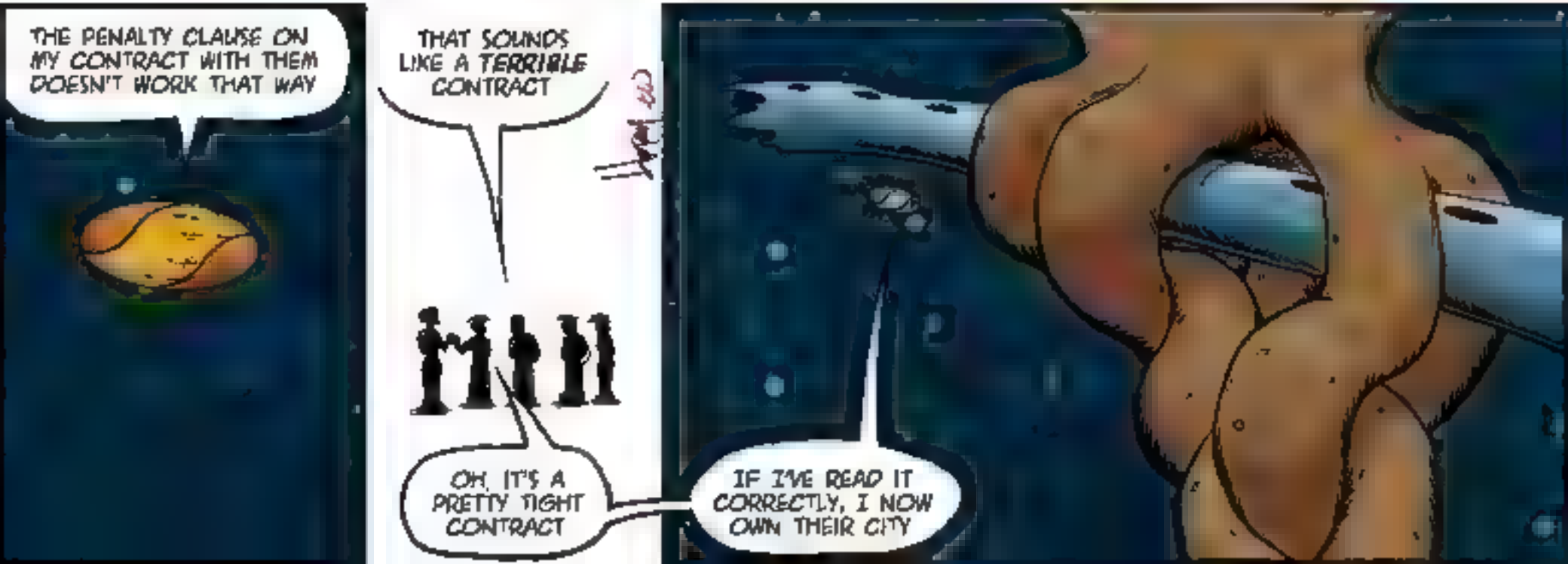
CINDERCONE
FOXWORTHY, REPORT
HOSTILES HAVE BEEN NEUTRALIZED ZERO CASUALTIES. WE'VE SECURED A SITE FOR NEGOTIATING TERMS OF SURRENDER AND RECOMPENSE.
GOOD WORK I'M ON MY WAY.
SHOULDN'T THAT BE MY JOB, CAPTAIN?
DOC?
HE'S FINE.
I OWN THE CONTRACT SO IT SHOULD BE MY JOB.
BUT SHE IS STILL LEAKING
SHE'S COMING WITH. CORK THAT STUMP WHILE WE RIDE.

BOAT SIX EN ROUTE TO ACCEPTING A SURRENDER.
I REALLY WANT TO PUNISH THE LITTLE MECH-FAIRIES, BUT THE ONES WHO DESERVE IT GOT AWAY
THERE OUGHT TO BE SOME REPARATIONS, COMMODORE.
GASCA THINKS HE KNOWS HOW THE WORLD FORGE WORKED, SO WE KIND OF ALREADY GOT WHAT WE CAME HERE FOR.
THE ESSPEES CAN'T UNDO THE HARM THEY DID, AND THEY DON'T HAVE ANYTHING WE NEED

WHAT WE NEED IS A WAY TO USE THE INFORMATION, BUT GASCA SAYS THE RESOURCES REQUIRED TO BUILD A WORLD FORGE SIMPLY DON'T EXIST.
NOT ANYMORE.

WHY BOTHER WITH THIS MEETING, THEN?
BECAUSE THE ESSPEES WILL DIE UNLESS THEY EVACUATE. AND WE'RE STILL THEIR BEST OPTION FOR A RIDE.

WE COULD CHARGE WHATEVER WE WANT. YOU COULD GET YOUR MONEY BACK, MURTAUGH.


THE PENALTY CLAUSE ON MY CONTRACT WITH THEM DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY
THAT SOUNDS LIKE A TERRIBLE CONTRACT
OH, IT'S A PRETTY TIGHT CONTRACT
IF I'VE READ IT CORRECTLY, I NOW OWN THEIR CITY

U.N.S. EMBASSY JUMPSTAR PRIME.
CAPTAIN HOW SOON WILL YOU BE RETURNING FROM YOUR EXTRA-CURRICULAR ADVENTURE?
IT'S NOT EXTRA-CURRICULAR, AMBASSADOR. THIS IS AN OFF-SITE TRAINING EXERCISE.
MOST OF THOSE "TRAINING" WITH YOU AREN'T U.N.S. PERSONNEL.
BECAUSE IT'S A JOINT-FORCES EXERCISE.
ACCORDING TO THIS ROSTER, YOU ARE THE ONLY U.N.S. SOLDIER THERE.
I'M LEARNING A LOT ABOUT WORKING WITH OTHER PEOPLE.

YOU'RE SURE THIS "EXERCISE" ISN'T AN OFF-THE-BOOKS OPERATION?
YOU APPEAR TO HAVE LOST HALF YOUR FACE.
OH, THAT. IT'S A LIVE FIRE EXERCISE.
THEN YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG, CAPTAIN. I HAPPEN TO KNOW THAT YOU OWN A PERFECTLY GOOD HELMET
MMM.. HALF A HELMET, AT THE MOMENT
AND IT HAS ACQUIRED SOME IMPERFECTIONS.

JUST TELL ME WHEN YOU'LL BE BACK.
EIGHT HOURS. WE'VE GOT SOME CLEANUP TO DO, AND THEN I PROMISED THE TROOPS A NICE MEAL.
Oooh!
DO NOT EAT ANY MORE OF THE ESSPEES!
But... mechorganic meat pies.
THEY'VE SURRENDERED. EATING THEM HAS STOPPED BEING UNSETTLING, AND STARTED BEING A WAR CRIME.
I told you. Food that talks isn't food.

CAPTAIN SORLIE, ARE YOU AVAILABLE FOR ATTACHE DUTIES THIS EVENING?
I'M UP TO MY ELBOWS IN SOME PRETTY EXCITING ENGINEERING RIGHT NOW.
IS IT EXCITING ENOUGH TO COST YOU YOUR JOB?
AMBASSADOR, IF YOU'RE OFFERING TO FIRE ME FOR UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE, I ACCEPT.
NO DEAL.
I CAN'T POSSIBLY FIRE SOMEONE WHO HAS SECRETS TO SHARE WITH ME THE MOMENT SHE RETURNS TO THE OFFICE.

HAH! IT'S RIGHT HERE, BETWEEN HULL LAYERS THREE AND FOUR!

I'm rather embarrassed to have missed that.

IT'S EASY TO MISS.

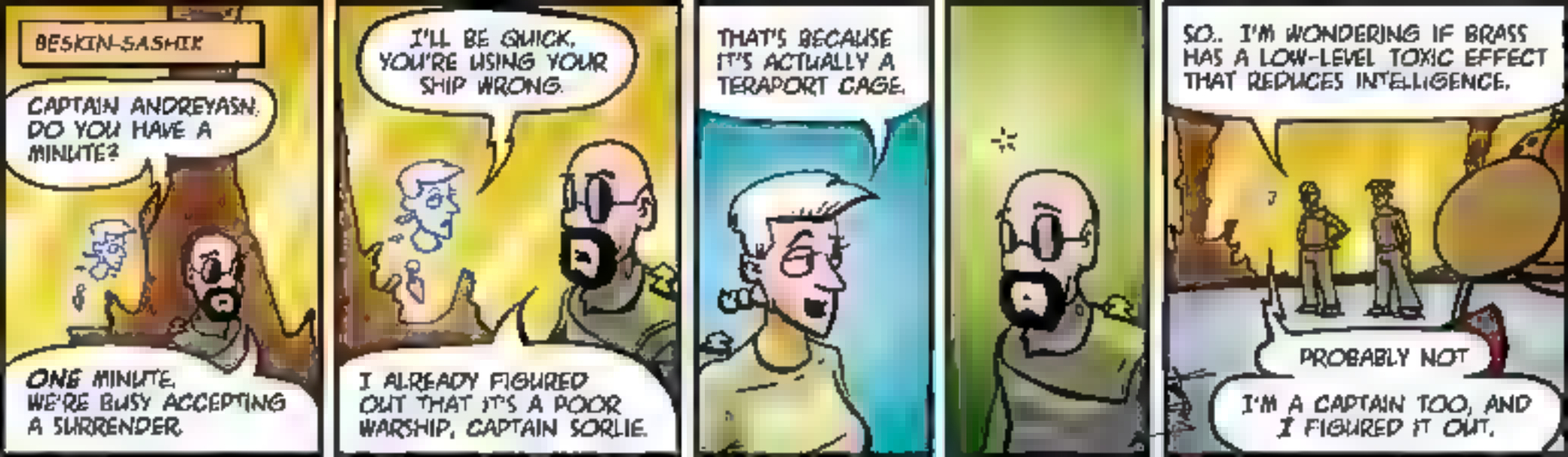
Easy to miss? You're talking about a multifield resonant matrix woven from a hundred thousand kilometers of polyconductor.

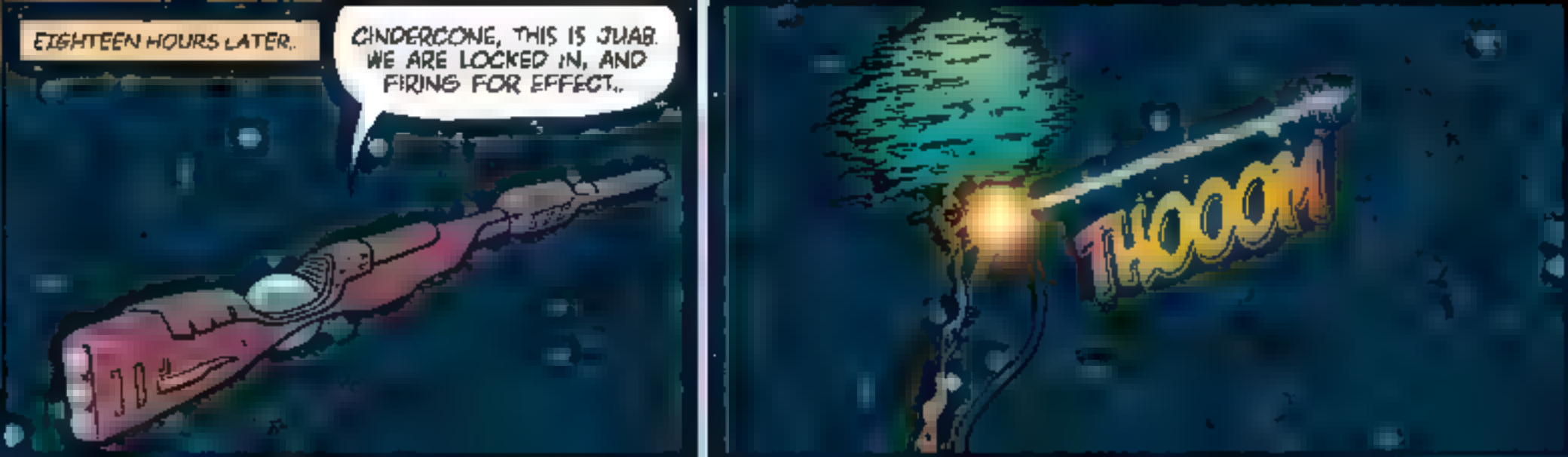
I saw the subsystem and thought it was just another layer of shielding.

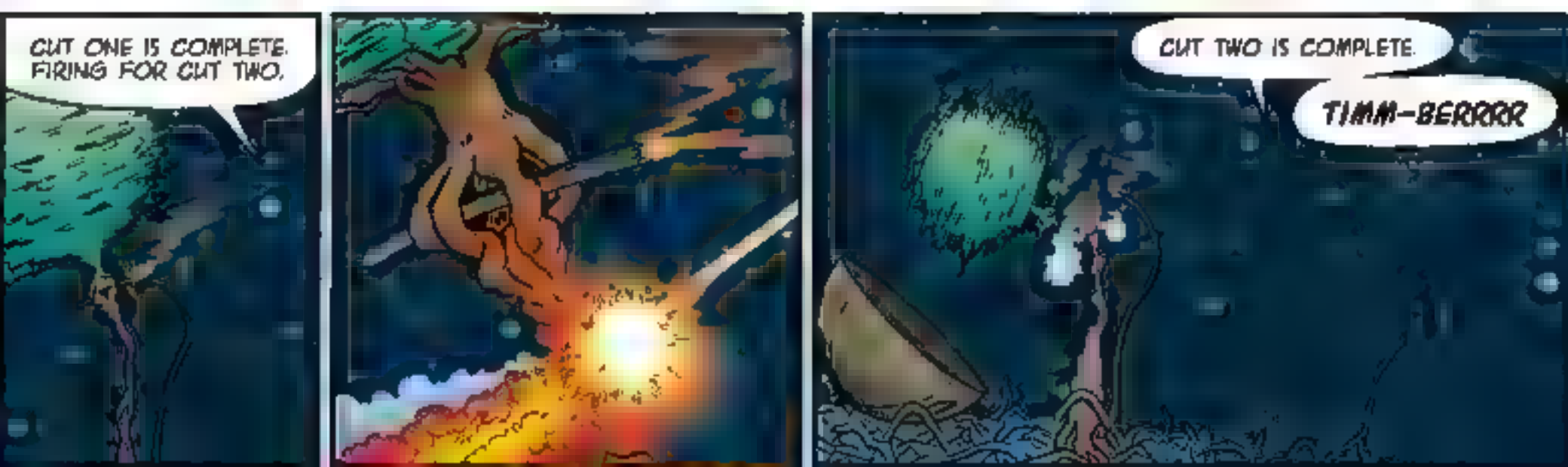
YEAH, BUT *IAFA'S* THE ONE WHO REPRESSED SO HARD HE FORGOT HOW HIS CARGO SHIPS WORK.

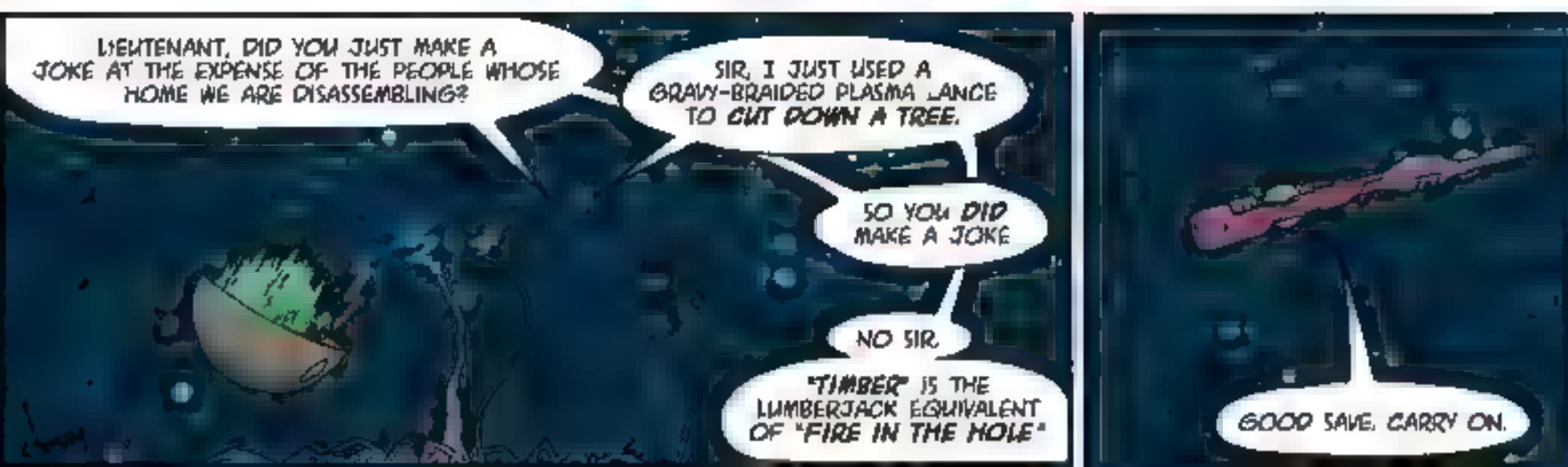
You need to work harder at getting fired so you can come work for me.

I'D WORK HARDER AT GETTING FIRED IF I THOUGHT IT WOULD ACTUALLY WORK.

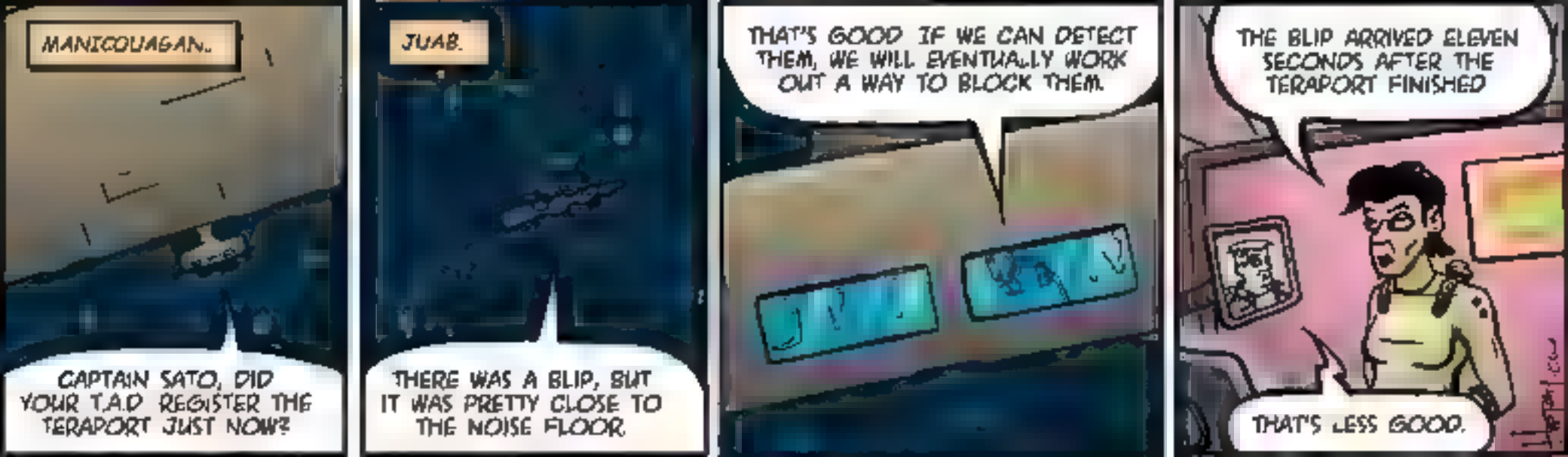

BESKIN-SASHIK
CAPTAIN ANDREYASN, DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE?
ONE MINUTE, WE'RE BUSY ACCEPTING A SURRENDER.
I'LL BE QUICK. YOU'RE USING YOUR SHIP WRONG.
I ALREADY FIGURED OUT THAT IT'S A POOR WARSHIP, CAPTAIN SORLIE.
THAT'S BECAUSE IT'S ACTUALLY A TERAPORT CAGE.
SO.. I'M WONDERING IF BRASS HAS A LOW-LEVEL TOXIC EFFECT THAT REDUCES INTELLIGENCE.
PROBABLY NOT
I'M A CAPTAIN TOO, AND I FIGURED IT OUT.


EIGHTEEN HOURS LATER..
CINDERCONE, THIS IS JUAB. WE ARE LOCKED IN, AND FIRING FOR EFFECT..
THOOOM

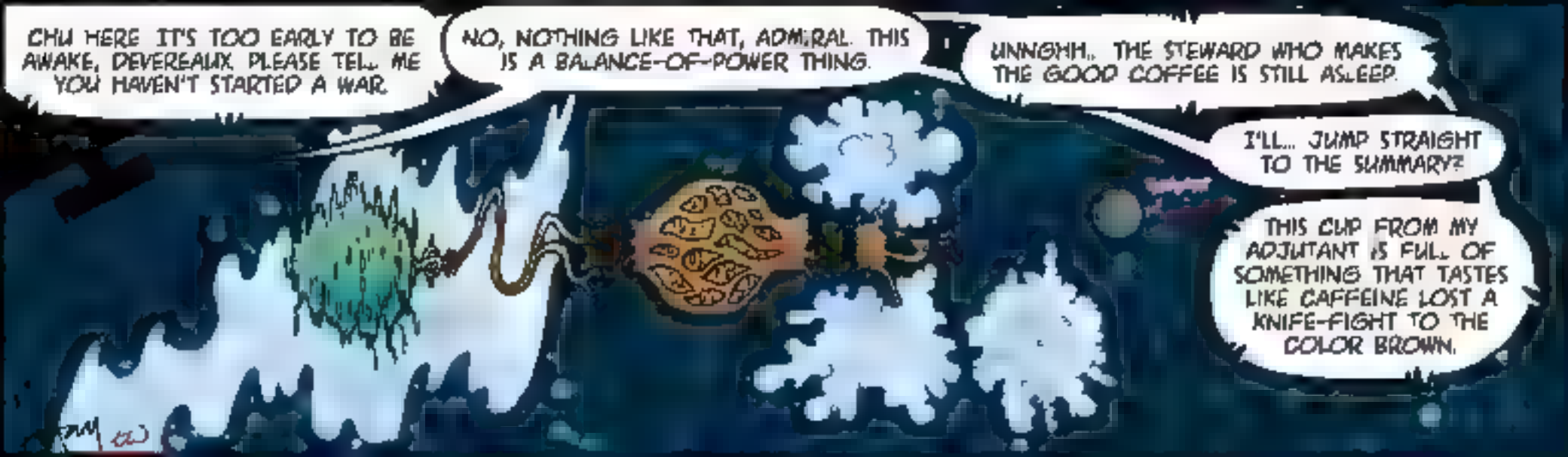

CUT ONE IS COMPLETE. FIRING FOR CUT TWO.
CUT TWO IS COMPLETE.
TIMM-BERRRR

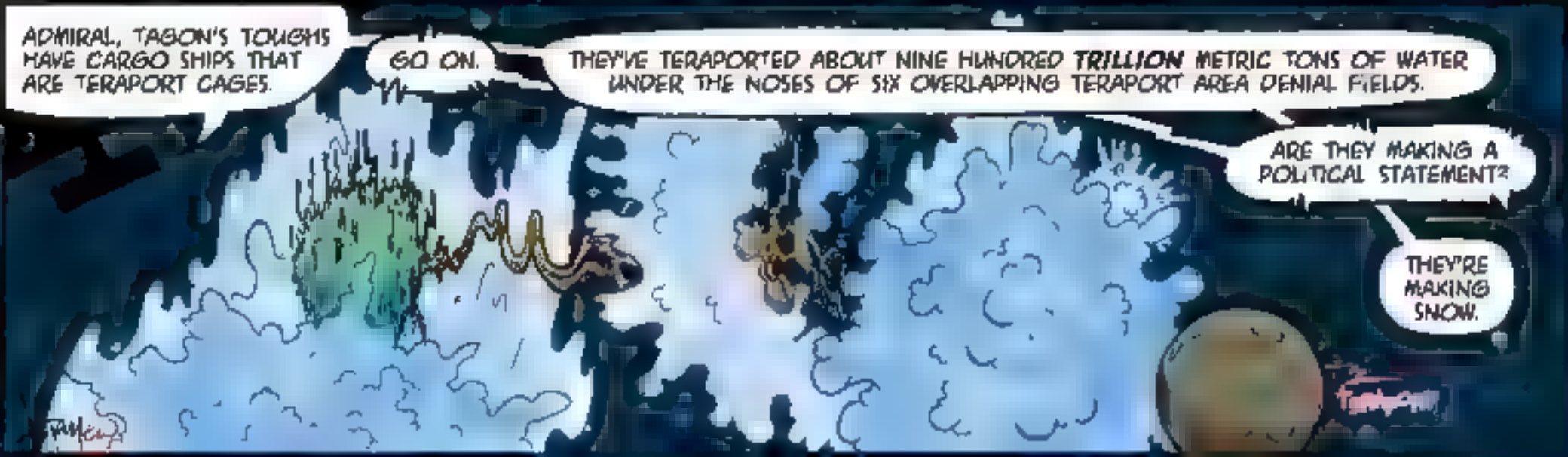

LIEUTENANT, DID YOU JUST MAKE A JOKE AT THE EXPENSE OF THE PEOPLE WHOSE HOME WE ARE DISASSEMBLING?
SIR, I JUST USED A GRAVY-BRAIDED PLASMA LANCE TO CUT DOWN A TREE.
SO YOU DID MAKE A JOKE
NO SIR.
"TIMBER" IS THE LUMBERJACK EQUIVALENT OF "FIRE IN THE HOLE"
GOOD SAVE. CARRY ON.

CINDERCONE
CLOSING THE CAGE. LET'S SEE HOW THIS GOES.
CINDERTWIN..
Received. Start sending the rest of the city.
"LET'S SEE HOW THIS GOES" ISN'T GOOD COMM PROTOCOL.
IT'S PERFECT PROTOCOL IF IT MADE THE ESSPEES NERVOUS.

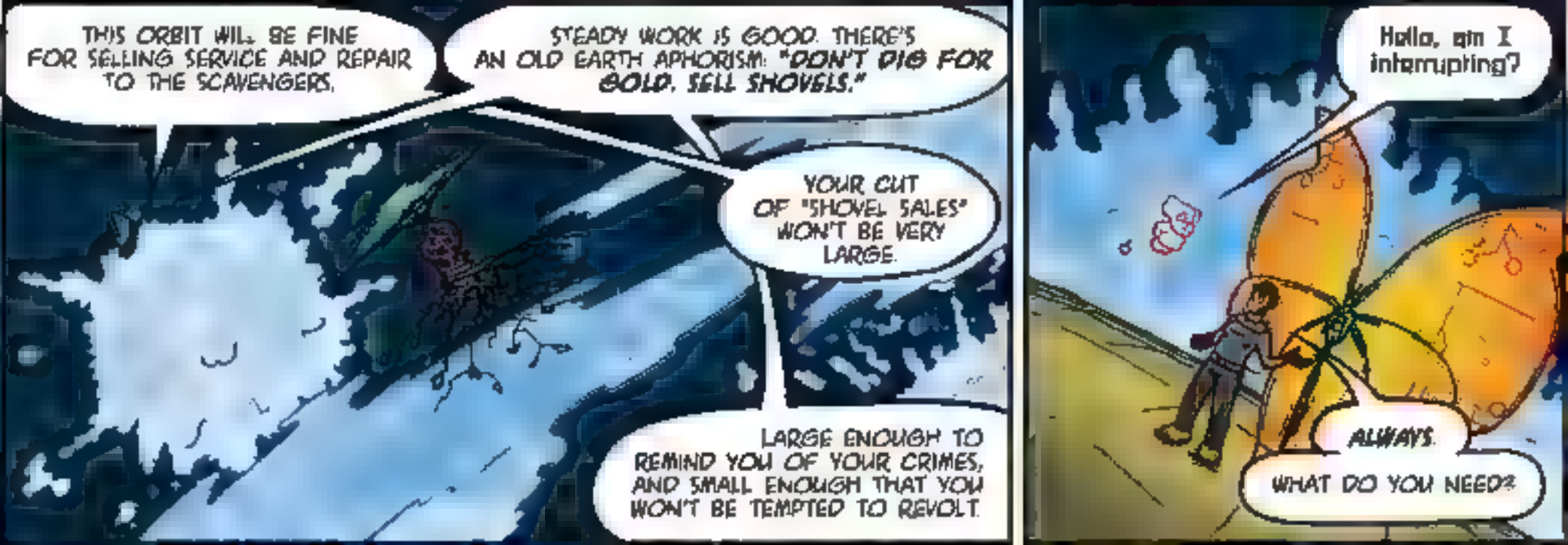

MANICOUAGAN.
CAPTAIN SATO, DID YOUR T.A.D REGISTER THE TERAPORT JUST NOW?
JUAB.
THERE WAS A BLIP, BUT IT WAS PRETTY CLOSE TO THE NOISE FLOOR.
THAT'S GOOD IF WE CAN DETECT THEM, WE WILL EVENTUALLY WORK OUT A WAY TO BLOCK THEM.
THE BLIP ARRIVED ELEVEN SECONDS AFTER THE TERAPORT FINISHED
THAT'S LESS GOOD.

MANNY, GET ME A DIRECT LINE TO ADMIRAL CHU.
Do you want Rear Admiral Chu of Europa Command, Vice-Admiral Chu of high Olympus command, or, umm...
I WANT THE ADMIRAL CHU WHO WAS JUST APPOINTED AS CHAIR OF THE U.N.S. JOINT CHIEFS.
It's 0300 local time for him.
THAT'S WHY I'M LETTING YOU WAKE HIM UP FOR ME.


CHU HERE IT'S TOO EARLY TO BE AWAKE, DEVEREAUX. PLEASE TELL ME YOU HAVEN'T STARTED A WAR.
NO, NOTHING LIKE THAT, ADMIRAL. THIS IS A BALANCE-OF-POWER THING.
UNNGHH... THE STEWARD WHO MAKES THE GOOD COFFEE IS STILL ASLEEP.
I'LL... JUMP STRAIGHT TO THE SUMMARY?
THIS CUP FROM MY ADJUTANT IS FULL OF SOMETHING THAT TASTES LIKE CAFFEINE LOST A KNIFE-FIGHT TO THE COLOR BROWN.

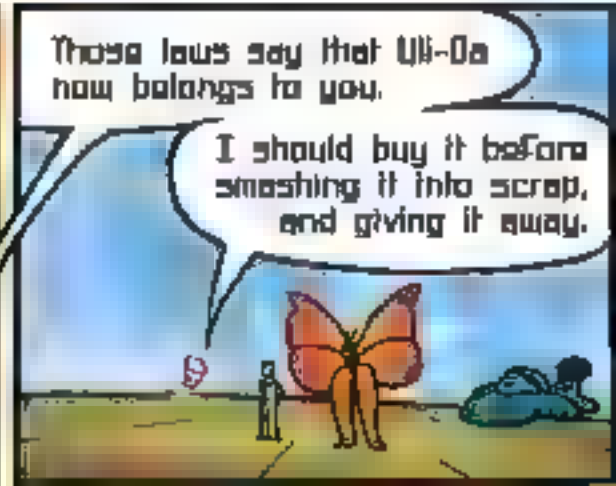

ADMIRAL, TAGON'S TOUGHS HAVE CARGO SHIPS THAT ARE TERAPORT CAGES.
GO ON.
THEY'VE TERAPORTED ABOUT NINE HUNDRED TRILLION METRIC TONS OF WATER UNDER THE NOSES OF SIX OVERLAPPING TERAPORT AREA DENIAL FIELDS.
ARE THEY MAKING A POLITICAL STATEMENT?
THEY'RE MAKING SNOW.

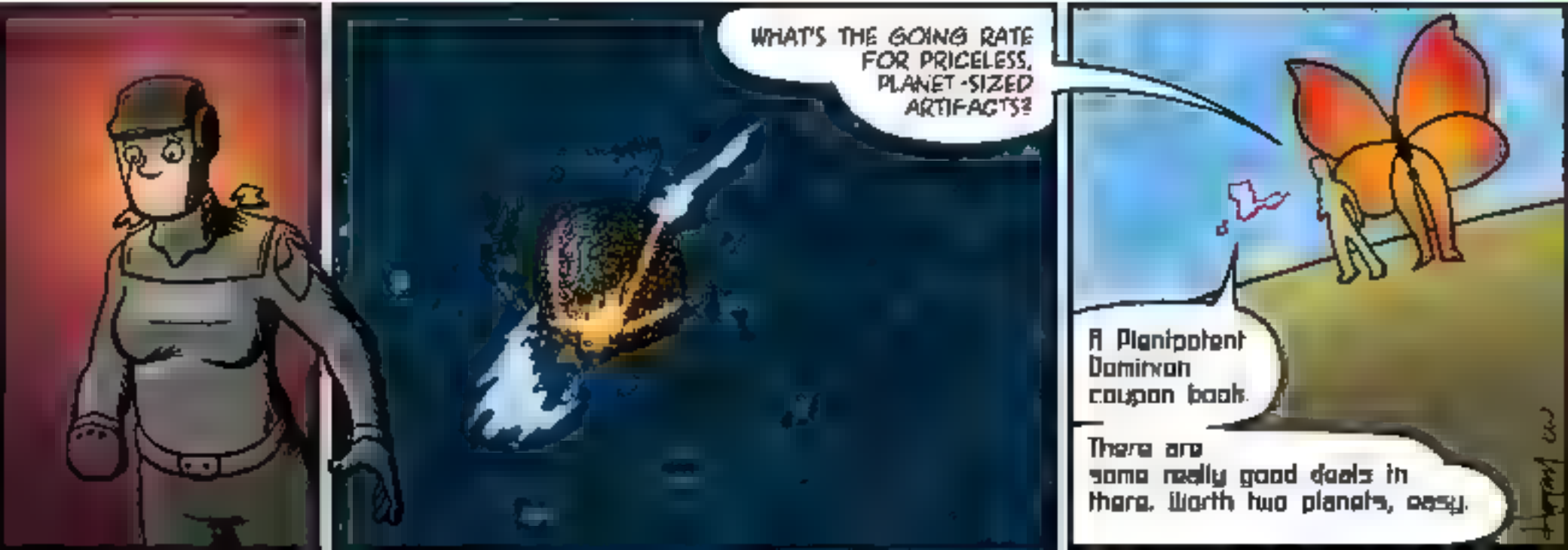
220 MILLION KILOMETERS FROM ULI-OA..
WILL THAT BE ENOUGH WATER?
WE DON'T REALLY NEED ANY, SO YES, IT'S ENOUGH.
WELL, WE NEEDED TO STRESS-TEST THE CINDERCAGES, AND THE WATER WAS HANDY
I WISH SOME OTHER ELEMENTS HAD BEEN HANDY
YOU CAN HAVE THE ONES YOU'RE STANDING ON.
BUT.. THIS IS THE CABIN SUPERSTRUCTURE FROM YOUR CARGO SHIP.
IT'S NOT COMPATIBLE WITH THAT SHIP ANYMORE.
BESIDES, YOUR PEOPLE TOUCHED IT A LOT.


THIS ORBIT WILL BE FINE FOR SELLING SERVICE AND REPAIR TO THE SCAVENGERS.
STEADY WORK IS GOOD. THERE'S AN OLD EARTH APHORISM: "DON'T DIG FOR GOLD, SELL SHOVELS."
YOUR CUT OF "SHOVEL SALES" WON'T BE VERY LARGE.
LARGE ENOUGH TO REMIND YOU OF YOUR CRIMES, AND SMALL ENOUGH THAT YOU WON'T BE TEMPTED TO REVOLT.
Hello, am I interrupting?
ALWAYS.
WHAT DO YOU NEED?

I wish to buy a piece of the City of Beskin-Seshik.

I OWN IT, BUT I PROMISED NOT TO CUT IT INTO PIECES.
This piece is already detached. You see, per the laws of the Plenipotent Dominion, the City of Beskin-Seshik includes the world they discovered, Uli-Da.


Those laws say that Uli-Da now belongs to you.
I should buy it before smashing it into scrap, and giving it away.


WHAT'S THE GOING RATE FOR PRICELESS, PLANET-SIZED ARTIFACTS?
A Planipotent Dominion coupon book.
There are some really good deals in there. Worth two planets, easy.

Captain Murtaugh, don't despair.
WHO SAYS I'M DESPAIRING?
Unless I'm reading you incorrectly, you feel like you paid too much for information you cannot use.
THAT'S NOT DESPAIR. IT'S REGRET
You've also given up hope that anyone will be able to use what you learned in time to save civilization.
OKAY, THAT'S THAT'S DESPAIR.
Exactly. Don't do that!
PETEY, YOU CAN'T ORDER ME TO HOPE. YOU HAVE TO GIVE ME HOPE
It's in the coupon book. Page two.

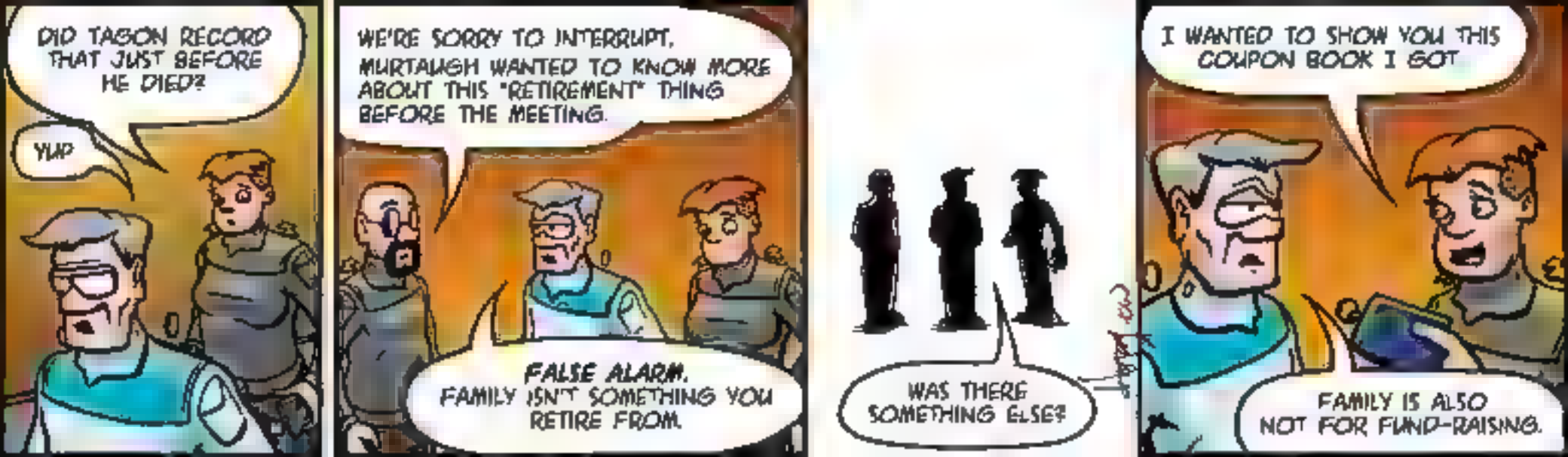
BOAT SIX TEMPORARY FLAGSHIP TAGON'S TOUGHS
MURTAUGH'S ON HER WAY IN.
SEND HER TO THE AFT READY-ROOM.
I'M CALLING A SHAREHOLDER MEETING. ASSEMBLE ALL THE OFFICERS.
ARE WE GOING TO VOTE ON SOMETHING?
THE USUAL. WHETHER OR NOT IT'S TIME TO RETIRE.
CAPTAIN, WILL YOU CALL THE ASSEMBLY?
I NEED TO GRAB A TUBE OF REFRESHING ENERGY PASTE AND MY FILIBUSTER SHOES.
TWO TUBES, PLEASE.

Commodore, I was supposed to wait three days before doing something, but I think you may want me to do it now.
DID MY SON ORDER YOU TO WITHHOLD SOMETHING FROM ME FOR THREE DAYS?
You're good at this.
SO... YOU CAN'T DIRECTLY ANSWER MY QUESTION, BUT YOU CAN OBEY A COUNTERMANDING ORDER ISSUED BY ME?
I'm a slave to some pretty twisty logic.
AND I'M A SLAVE TO SOME OUTDATED NATURAL SELECTION MECHANISMS. WE'LL GET THROUGH THIS.

Recorded message begins:
HEY, DAD.
I'M SORRY ABOUT THIS. I KNOW HOW IMPORTANT FAMILY IS TO YOU.
I ACTUALLY KNEW IT BEFORE YOU STARTED PESTERING ME FOR GRANDKIDS.
AND NO, I'M NOT DOING THIS TO MAKE THE PESTERING STOP
YOUR DNA IS ON FILE, BOY. I CAN MAKE GRANDKIDS WITHOUT YOUR HELP.

ANYWAY, FAMILY
I STILL SEE THEIR FACES.
I WISH I'D LISTENED TO YOU, OR BEEN FASTER.
WE BOTH LOST EVERYTHING, AND THEN WE LOST EACH OTHER.
I CAN'T FIX THAT
I CAN'T BRING THEM BACK
BUT I DID BRING YOU IN.
SEE, I ACCIDENTLY BUILT A NEW FAMILY.

IT'S BIG, AND BROKEN, AND MESSY, AND NOW IT'S YOURS.
OOPS. PRIVATE MOMENT
ALSO, I THINK MAYBE CAPTAIN MURTAUGH IS SWEET ON YOU.
SO AWKWARD.


DID TABON RECORD THAT JUST BEFORE HE DIED?
YUP
WE'RE SORRY TO INTERRUPT. MURTAUGH WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THIS "RETIREMENT" THING BEFORE THE MEETING.
FALSE ALARM. FAMILY ISN'T SOMETHING YOU RETIRE FROM.
WAS THERE SOMETHING ELSE?
I WANTED TO SHOW YOU THIS COUPON BOOK I GOT.
FAMILY IS ALSO NOT FOR FUND-RAISING.

SHAREHOLDERS MEETING

OUR FLAGSHIP, **BROKEN WIND**, NEEDS A COMPLETE CABIN REFIT, AND SEVERAL OF HER ORIGINAL OAFAN SYSTEMS WILL HAVE TO BE REPLACED.

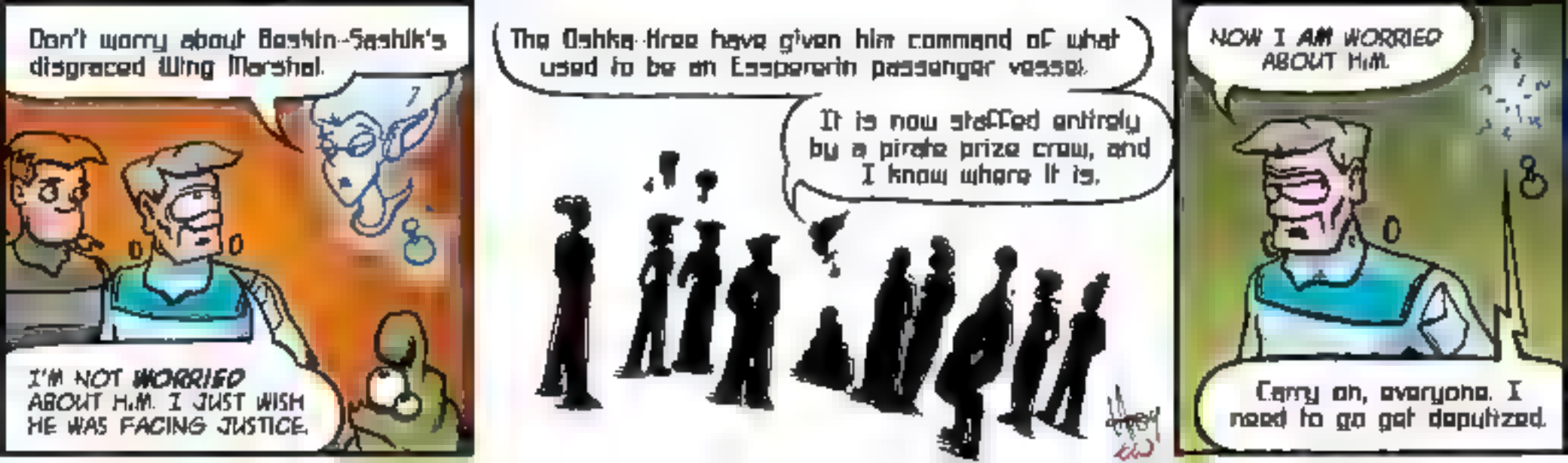
OUR CARGO SHIP IS NOW ONE HALF OF A PAIR OF TERAPORT CAGES, SO THE CABIN STRUCTURE WE INSTALLED THERE LAST YEAR IS A TOTAL LOSS. WE GAVE THAT TO THE ESSPEES AS SCRAP

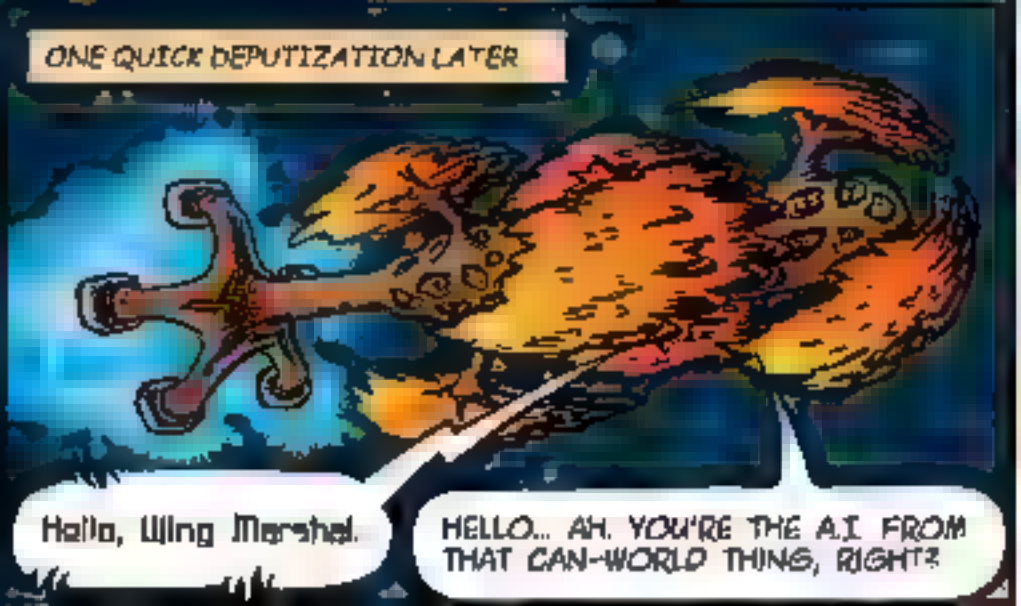
CINDY'S CORE, WHICH WE BROUGHT OVER FROM BRISTLECONE, IS NOW HOMELESS. SHE IS HIBERNATING UNTIL WE FIND A SUITABLE HULL INTO WHICH SHE CAN BE INSTALLED.

AND NOW THE GOOD NEWS...
ALL OF THIS WILL BE COVERED BY THE PLENIPOTENT DOMINION. PETEY GAVE MURTAUGH A COUPON BOOK

A COUPON BOOK? IS IT OLD SCHOOL, WITH PULPY, DEAD TREE, TEAR-OUT PAGES?
IT'S JUST A DATA STACK NO TREES WERE HARMED.

IS THERE A COUPON IN THERE FOR "HUNT DOWN THE WING MARSHAL AND ASSASSINATE HIM FOR GREAT JUSTICE?"
THERE IS NOT
PETEY SEEMS TO THINK ASSASSINATION IS EVEN WORSE THAN PULPING TREES FOR PAPER.

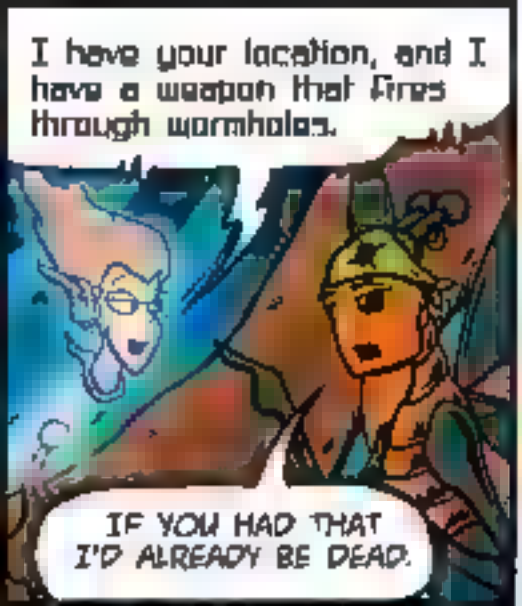

Don't worry about Beshin-Seshik's disgraced Wing Marshal.
I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT HIM. I JUST WISH HE WAS FACING JUSTICE.
The Oshka-Kree have given him command of what used to be an Esperorin passenger vessel.
It is now staffed entirely by a pirate prize crew, and I know where it is.
NOW I AM WORRIED ABOUT HIM.
Carry on, everyone. I need to go get deputized.


ONE QUICK DEPUTIZATION LATER
Hello, Wing Marshal.
HELLO... AH. YOU'RE THE A.I. FROM THAT CAN-WORLD THING, RIGHT?

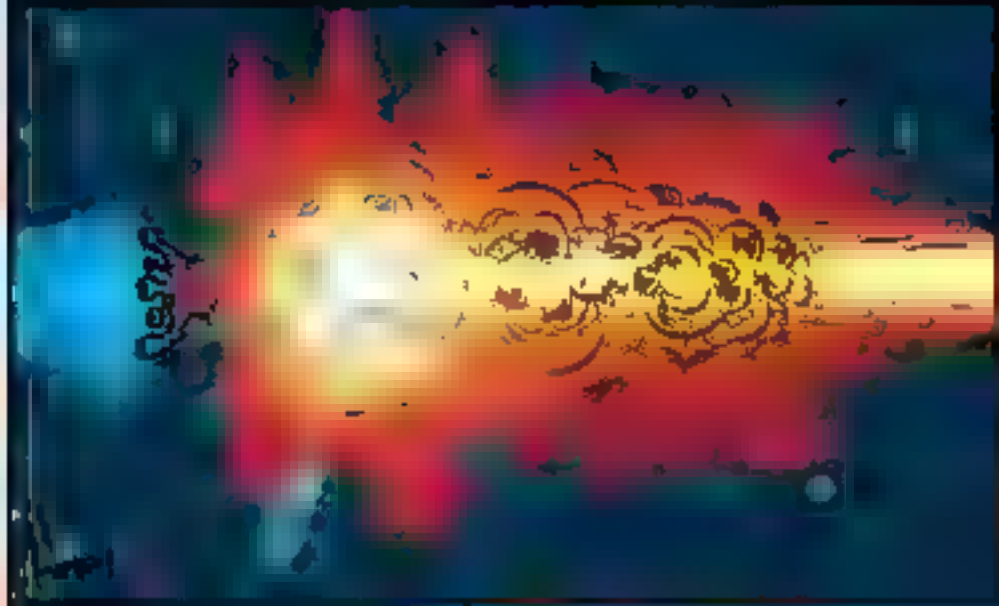
I am Chinook, of Etna-Rea, Goddess of Earth, Wind, and Plumbing.

PLUS HUBRIS, AND UNSOLICITED HYPERNET CALLS.
The long version of my title should definitely include those.

I am a Deputy of the Office of the First Provident of Beskin-Seshik, and that is the capacity in which I am calling.
You have violated the Compact of the Wing.
The penalty is death.
WELL, FORTUNATELY FOR ME THERE'S A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DEATH SENTENCE AND ACTUAL DEATH.
At this point the only difference is a small matter of targeting.

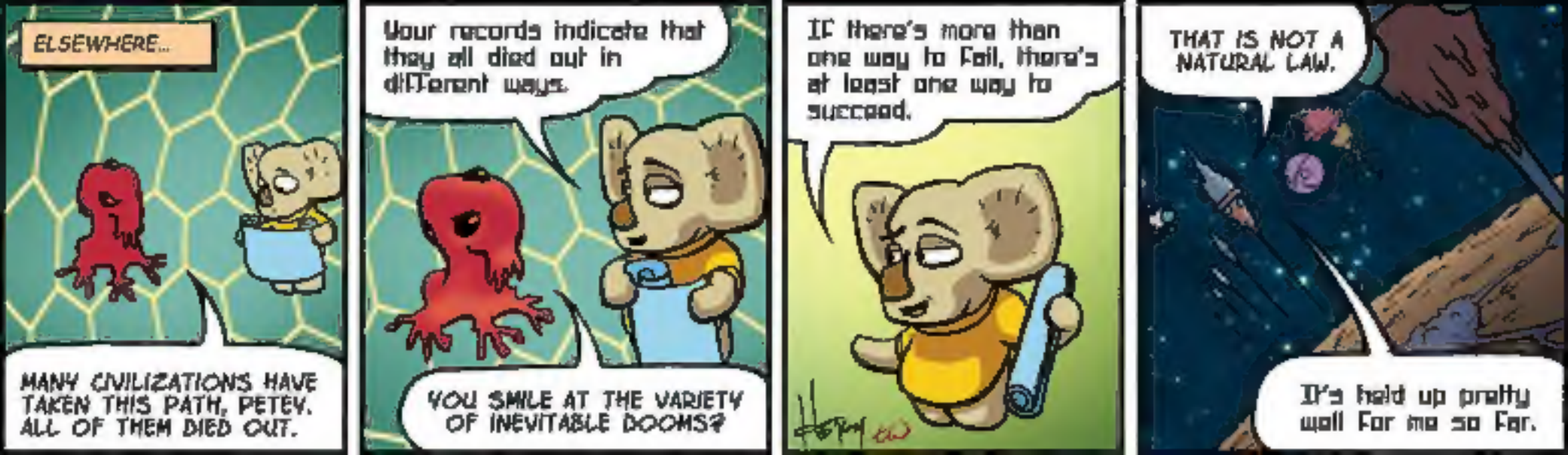

I have your location, and I have a weapon that fires through wormholes.
IF YOU HAD THAT I'D ALREADY BE DEAD.

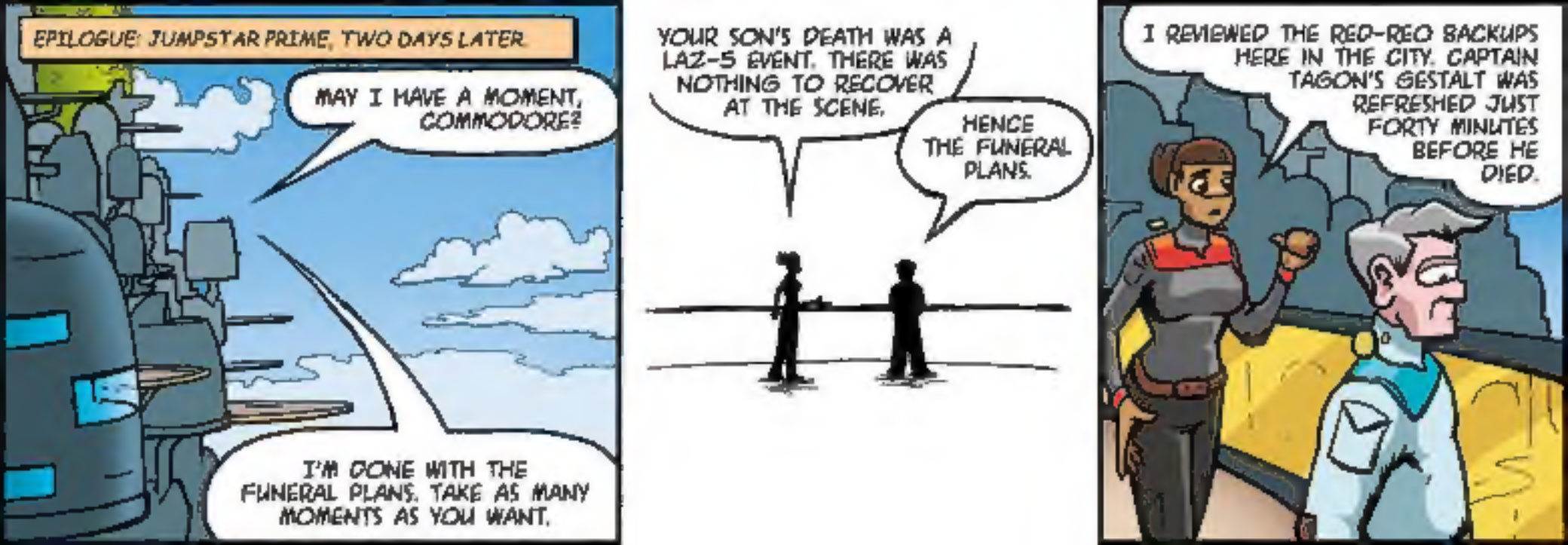
You hurt my friends, so I'm adding three seconds of fear to your sentence.
WAIT!
LET'S MAKE A

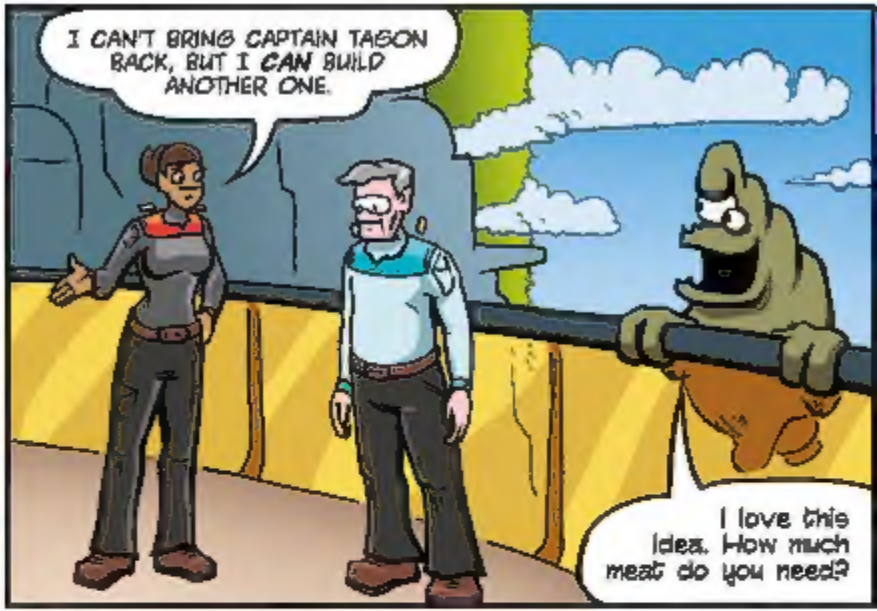

CRACKLE

MEANWHILE BACK AT THE SHAREHOLDERS MEETING
THIS COUPON AWARDS ME SOME OF THE OUTPUT OF THE WORLD FORGE THAT PETEY AND ANDREYASN PRIME HAVE BEGUN BUILDING.
I THINK THAT MEANS WE DIDN'T FAIL.
BUT... GASCA SAID WE CAN'T BUILD ONE. WE WOULD HAVE TO CAPTURE A PA'ANURI TO HELP POWER IT
THAT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR US, BUT I GUESS PETEY CAN DO IT
MAAAYBE, BUT THAT'S NOT HIS STYLE.
OH THAT'S WHY HE WENT TO ALL THAT TROUBLE TO SECURE OISRI FOR HIMSELF.
HE'S GOING TO USE IT TO CREATE A PA'ANURI.
A NON-SENTIENT PA'ANURI THAT WON'T COMPLAIN ABOUT THE LONG HOURS.

THAT SOUNDS LIKE A TERRIBLE IDEA.
IF MY TIME CLONE IS ON THE JOB, IT MIGHT JUST WORK.
If your time clone is on the job, it's definitely going to work, and it's still a terrible idea.
IT MIGHT SAVE THE GALAXY, THOUGH.
You gotta figure out how to do that using good ideas.


ELSEWHERE...
MANY CIVILIZATIONS HAVE TAKEN THIS PATH, PETEY. ALL OF THEM DIED OUT.
Your records indicate that they all died out in different ways.
YOU SMILE AT THE VARIETY OF INEVITABLE DOOMS?
If there's more than one way to fail, there's at least one way to succeed.
THAT IS NOT A NATURAL LAW.
It's held up pretty well for me so far.


EPILOGUE: JUMPSTAR PRIME, TWO DAYS LATER.
MAY I HAVE A MOMENT, COMMODORE?
I'M DONE WITH THE FUNERAL PLANS. TAKE AS MANY MOMENTS AS YOU WANT.
YOUR SON'S DEATH WAS A LAZ-5 EVENT. THERE WAS NOTHING TO RECOVER AT THE SCENE.
HENCE THE FUNERAL PLANS.
I REVIEWED THE REO-REO BACKUPS HERE IN THE CITY. CAPTAIN TAGON'S GESTALT WAS REFRESHED JUST FORTY MINUTES BEFORE HE DIED.



THE END...

You've reached the end of ***Big, Dumb Objects***, Schlock Mercenary Book 16 but you have not yet reached the end of *Schlock Mercenary*. Don't worry. There's plenty left.

A Little Immortality, Schlock Mercenary Book 17, begins with the very next strip...